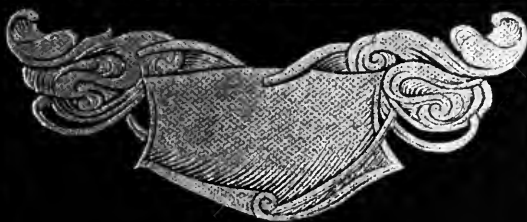


A TOUCH OF  
FANTASY

~ A NOVEL ~  
BY A. H. ADAMS





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A TOUCH OF FANTASY

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*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

GALAHAD JONES. A Tragic  
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# A TOUCH OF FANTASY

A ROMANCE FOR THOSE WHO ARE  
LUCKY ENOUGH TO WEAR GLASSES  
ARTHUR H. ADAMS



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TO THE ONE  
WIFE AND MOTHER,  
WHOM TO LOVE NEEDS NO GLASSES.



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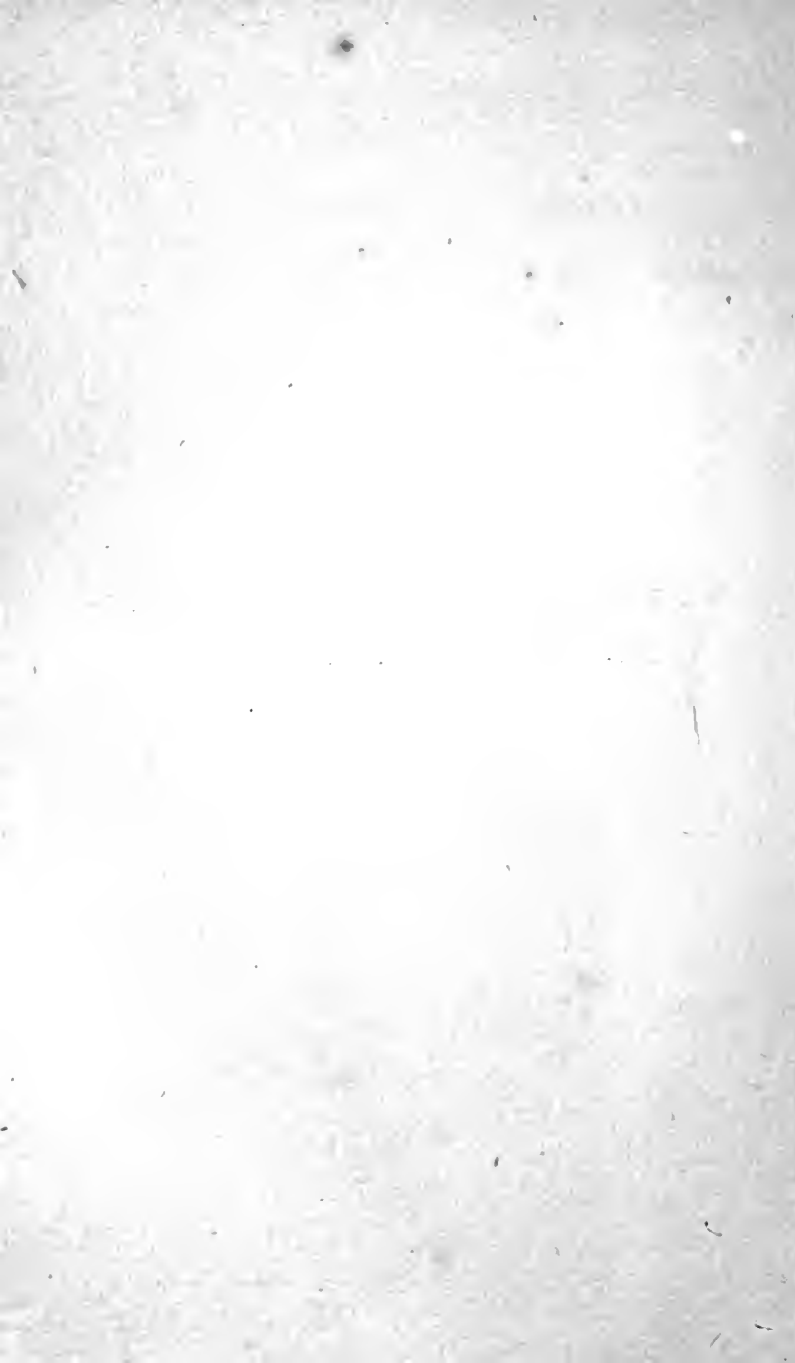
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A TOUCH OF FANTASY

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# A TOUCH OF FANTASY

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## CHAPTER I

### IN WHICH HUGH ROBJOHN LOOKS ON LIFE

**T**HERE was certainly something extraordinary about the spectacles.

Hugh Robjohn poised them delicately upon his nose—a nose that the fat little insinuating optician assured him was simply created for spectacles—and gazed intently at the optician's puffy face. There was certainly something miraculous, something almost uncanny, about these glasses.

It was not that he saw more plainly, without the faint blur that used to surround the objects of his visional world; it was not that the sense of eye-strain had suddenly vanished; it was that he seemed to see more deeply, almost as if he had penetrated beyond the surfaces of things down to their hidden souls. He had the strange feeling as if the world had been unveiled, as if behind that grey dimness of his sight had been, all the time, a magnificent Venus of marble. And now the cloak that shielded her had dropped to her feet, and she reigned dazzling

in the sunlight. But it was no mere surface, no visible rounded contour of grace that he saw, but Beauty herself unveiled. He had the sudden feeling of having been for years in a darkened room; and now he felt the walls widening, dissolving, vanishing, to let in the miracle of a universe of stars. He braced himself, as if on the threshold of some new and unsuspected world. He stood on the verge, tip-toe . . . . .

After all, what he saw was only the puffy face of the little optician, the twinkling, sly little eyes, the lean, insinuating mouth, the insignificant nose nipped with glittering pince-nez. He had seen all that before he had tried on the spectacles, blurred a little, and further away; but now . . . . . !

A week before, Hugh Robjohn had, at last, persuaded himself that his eyes needed attention. He had gone on so long misusing them—reading at breakfast, reading at lunch, reading in bed, reading any sort of type in any sort of light—that it was a shock to him to find them failing him. Blurs came often before them at inconvenient moments; black specks came sailing into his vision and obstructing his view of the type; sudden pin-points of brilliance danced away when he looked up; headaches came just when he needed to concentrate his attention on his reading; more than once he had actually to put down an entrancing volume like “The Meaning of Money,” and go out, half-blinded, into the night,

wondering, and half-fearing to guess, what it might mean to him and his great ambition.

It was annoying, this sudden reminder that he was not a machine—or, at least, that he was a machine that needed attention and periodical overhauling. Especially as his great work on “National Economics”—the book that was going to revolutionise the world’s ideas upon tariffs and trade—would require all his attention now. He had got to the thirteenth chapter, and his theory, staunchly founded on history and strongly buttressed with proofs, was stretching cheerfully out through the other nineteen chapters to its triumphant close. And now—his eyes!

He used them all day in the office. He was a clerk in a vague Government department in the big Public Works building in Sydney; and his routine duties—inconceivably remote from his “boss,” a Permanent Secretary of Something Important—took all his working hours. He had to read innumerable letters and pass them on to vague heads of departments. And weeks later he would recognise them returned to him stamped and signed and noted and countersigned in a decoration of many-hued inks. It was not an exciting job. Still, he presumed that he was doing work in some way useful to the State, probably to the Government, possibly to the world. Anyhow, he was paid for it a small but regular salary, which automatically rose

a few pounds every five years; and, if Permanent Secretaries were not so painfully permanent, and he survived long enough, he might at length attain to the permanency of a Permanent Secretary himself. Meantime in his evenings and on his Sundays he was writing a book that would revolutionise the world's commerce.

Hugh had gone to see the eye specialist—a little dreamy man with a great forehead and a far-away look in his eyes. The specialist had listened patiently to Hugh's account of his symptoms: it was part of his duty to listen to the patient's own view of his eyes, but it lost him much of his valuable time when, with one examination, he could determine all that the patient took so long in needlessly telling him.

He made his examination quietly, with a "yes, yes," or an "ah!" muttered to himself, and an aloofness from his patient that irritated Hugh. To the specialist this was merely an uninteresting case—and he had hoped for something pretty, involving a difficult and dainty operation. He was depressed; but life was full of disappointments. It was a week since he had had a good operation.

"Is it serious?" asked Hugh, anxious because of the specialist's silence.

"No," said the specialist sadly, with an effort recalling himself to the fact that the patient was a human being. He had been so interested, as

always, in the beautiful mechanism of the human eye. Then softly, distantly, he answered :

“ Spectacles.”

“ I must wear spectacles ? ” asked Hugh.

The specialist did not answer. He was busy adjusting upon Hugh's nose a cumbrous frame that looked like the ancient horn-rimmed spectacles of the Chinese.

“ Only eye-strain, due to a defect in the shape of the eye.”

The oculist dropped the remark absently, pulling out a drawer and selecting two lenses from a glittering array. These, and others in turn, he dropped into the frame, until, with but a polite attention to Hugh's opinions, the specialist seemed wearily satisfied. He had had three similar cases that morning.

Sadly he made Hugh look at an electric light through glasses that painted a red bar across his vision. Hugh was interested in the behaviour of that bar. He told the oculist about it.

That little man suddenly shared Hugh's interest. A soft “ Curious ! ” dropped dreamily from him. Hugh waited.

“ There's a somewhat rare defect that will need specially ground glasses,” he announced eagerly. All his sadness had vanished. Here, after all, was a pretty case. “ You will have to get these glasses made to my prescription.” He gave the name of an optician and wrote an order. “ Rare—at least

in Australia. I shall be interested if, after you have worn these glasses for a month or so, you let me examine you again. Very interesting!"

"And with glasses my eyes will be all right?" asked Hugh.

"With proper care—no reading with artificial light. What is your profession? In the Government?"

Hugh admitted it, wondering if this man knew everything.

"Then you won't be reading much at night. That's good."

"But I'm—I'm writing a book!" gasped Hugh.

"Writing a novel?" The specialist was surprised.

"No, no! A *book*!"

"Ah!" The specialist looked down on Hugh in his chair with a little amused tolerance. "You'll have to drop it for a while. Afterwards . . . we'll see."

"But it is most important."

"More than your eyes?"

"More than everything."

The specialist smiled. "Your eyes are everything. How old are you? Forty?"

"Thirty-six," said Hugh.

"Your eyes, with care, will last you all your life. Better look after them. By-and-by you may take up your book. But write it by daylight."

Hugh promised—with reservations—and got quickly out of that room of bright reflectors and



weird instruments of torture that made you blink, out into the blurred sunlight of an Australian summer day, and looked vaguely into the large face of a policeman, and knew that it was good.

It was on the morning of December 24th when at last he got his spectacles from the optician. He had entered the little shop in Bridge Street, going carefully down the three steps that led from the street—for the shop had been there in the early days of Sydney, before the street was graded. And the little optician, a round blur of a figure, had, with a grotesque flourish, handed him the gold, glittering things.

“You see, sir, they are made in two pieces, the larger lens for outdoor use, and the smaller section for reading.”

He held an absurd chart of letters at arm's-length, and so vivid did the lettering seem to Hugh that he could almost make sense out of that haphazard and tottering alphabet.

“By this arrangement you don't require two pairs of glasses, sir. Look at me.”

Hugh looked, and saw a strange and unsuspected soul. In that round puffy face, now so brilliantly illumined, he read the history of the man's patient life. The features seemed to radiate purpose. Hugh guessed at his youth, divined his wife and children on the floor above, saw in it all a sort of microscopic romance. This insignificant man was

no mere shopkeeper; he was almost a god—a creator of light. And the shop shone vivid and sharp with the glitter of lenses, a little jewelled shop, a miracle of wonder and delight.

Hugh looked again at the sly, eager little face of the optician. It was the first time in all his thirty-six years of living that he had looked on Life.

He had, of course, thought and dreamed about it. He had diligently read about it; but he had always looked at it through the pages of a book—and pages of books are, when you come to think of it, singularly opaque. It had never really occurred to him before that life was everywhere about him—jostling him on the ferries and the trams, infringing on him in his dusty office, hovering over him at his boarding-house, waiting for him at every street corner. He had never guessed that the freight that the ferries carried was not passengers but a bundle of hopes and fears, a load of dreams and cares, a bouquet of romance, that the streets were but streams of conflicting purposes, or that the darkness of the stalls and galleries contained more thrills than the audience paid to see. He had looked at life through print, as a young girl looks at life through novels; and the strange brilliance of the real thing disconcerted him. All that was going on those thirty-six years, and he had not guessed! How much of that crowded wonder he had missed!

“They suit you admirably, sir,” the optician in-

sinuated. "You have just the nose for them. I am glad you did not have pince-nez. They ask me to make pince-nez for women. And women have no noses!"

"Haven't they?" asked Hugh, startled.

He had always taken their noses, as he had always taken their nose's owners, for granted. Now he saw that the optician was right. Women had no noses—or only the apologies for noses. Yet, after all, women had no need to apologise.

"Tell me," Hugh began, "these spectacles—are they made from any special sort of glass?"

"Oh yes, sir, I use only the best glass."

"But these particular lenses? Who made them?"

"I ground them, sir, from Dr. Mahon's prescription."

"Yes. But where did the glass itself come from?"

"From Jena, in Germany. They make the best spectacle glasses there, sir."

Germany! And into Hugh's mind swept memories of Grimm's fairy tales, of legends of kobolds and elves and gnomes, of strange races of swart, stunted beings that lived in the darkness underground—tales of magic crystals, of enchanted stones, tales of eeriness and terror . . . What if these spectacles, through which he saw so miraculously, had been made of magic crystal by some old gnome of the under-earth? . . . . .

"I came from Germany myself, from the Black Forest, sir," murmured the optician.

Hugh looked sharply at him through the magic glasses. The Black Forest! A German? Of course. And, if a German, why not a gnome?

Here, indeed, in this strange underground shop in Australia, lived a magician, a gnome that gave a new strange sight to lucky mortals. This fat little thing that had made him these glasses—why, he had stepped straight from the pages of Grimm! It was easy enough to recognise him now, easy enough when he had the glasses to see.

He paid his prosaic bill, and hurried up the three steps to the sunlight again. He wondered, indeed, if it were a shop he had just quitted. So much that was magical had happened there that he feared that that place of wonder was, after all, only a cave of illusion. It would vanish in the night. To-morrow he would search for it, and find that those three steps had vanished from Bridge Street. And this wonderful new vision of his would blur over, and leave him once more groping blindly through life. He glanced once back, to remember, at least, how it looked. The German name of the optician stared at him in silver letters. Then, not quite satisfied, he turned and hurried down the street. He had so much of the wonderful world to see—and he was thirty-six!

(But perhaps, after all, no miracle had been

worked. Hugh's new clarity of vision may have been due solely to the conscientious workmanship of the prosaic little German who made those glasses . . . If you—you who are lucky enough to wear glasses—read this history through to the end, perhaps you will be able to say.

And, as for myself, even now I am doubtful whether the German optician was really a gnome.)

## CHAPTER II

WHICH CONTAINS A DISSERTATION UPON  
BOARDING-HOUSES

**I**T was a new city into which this spectacled being emerged, his head held high, his glasses flashing their silver and gold upon a world new created. The street was full of people—but were they really people?

Instead of dull, expressionless, work-wearied faces flowing past him in a slow and turbid stream, he beheld a clear, swift-speeding, brimming river of romance. He saw, beneath their prosaic cloaks, strange histories hurrying past; he came unsuspected upon masked adventures waiting stealthily at every corner; taxi-cabs and hooded hansoms bore dramas to their tragic climax; love and yearning looked at him unknowingly from the eyes of couples that, with tremulous hearts, chattered of prosaic things; hope and fear and joy and grief flashed up at him from dulled faces. These were not people: they were souls, each with a story behind, each with infinite romance ahead.

At Circular Quay, on that morning of December

24th, he found Sydney in the whirlpool of its holiday madness. He plunged into a hurrying stream of beings, laden with parcels, hurrying home to households of children. Mothers trailed crying babies under the snouts of harassed trams; hansoms and taxi-cabs threaded their miraculous way across the conflicting currents of chattering girls. He was swept along in the stream that surged toward the pontoon for the Mosman boat.

As the boat swam out, in line with five others that, once out of the neck of Sydney Cove, would fan out to the far corners of the harbour, Hugh forgot to dive into his bag for a heavy book. He looked eagerly about him, finding in the faces of women a sudden extraordinary interest.

As for the women, they took no notice of the quick, fluttering glitter of those gold-rimmed spectacles. At least, they showed no interest.

At Musgrave Street wharf Hugh got out and climbed the steep street to his boarding-house. All the way home he had been wondering whether his new glasses would enable him to see anything interesting in his boarding-house. That was the supreme test. For all boarding-houses are the same boarding-house—and he had tried them all. In fact, he had often ruminated over the one glaring omission of the Creator of a varied and complex universe. Why, when the world was full of distinctive and individual things, when no two faces—

except the faces of policemen—were alike, when no two leaves of the same tree were exactly the same shape, when all this versatility of creation had been expended on such insignificant things as flowers and physiognomies, had there been created only one type of boarding-house? You would think, he had mused, that in all the world there would have been room for two, or possibly three, types of boarding-house. And it was the absurd hope that he might yet discover the somewhat different boarding-house that had beguiled him all over Sydney suburbs in his eternal search. Every new boarding-house—and he had tried scores since his arrival in Sydney—had seemed to him the golden grail of his quest. So for a week he drank from the golden grail. Then he tasted the bitter dregs of the cup. Little unexpected things, like a fire in your bedroom, became “extras”; the man opposite you drank soup with his moustache; the girl, in her alleged dusting of the room, disturbed your manuscripts; the women at the table were cats; the landlady would tell you she had known better times when her husband was alive—but what was a lone widow to do?

And Hugh would hopefully advertise again, and search once more to find the foot of the rainbow. He still would dream impossible dreams of that perfect boarding-house, comforted in his belief that it existed somewhere on earth—for there would be, he felt sure, no boarding-houses in heaven—yet each



time he came to earth with the familiar meeting with the inevitable boarding-house bacon and eggs.

Yet "Arden," where Hugh had lodged longer than was his wont, kept up a pretence of being somewhat different. To begin with, you dropped down from the street into a garden hewn out of the steep hillside, a garden fair with oleanders, fragrant with wattles, and bright with hibiscus and flame-trees and jacarandas. And the boarding-house itself veiled its reality in the spring with a vesture of wistaria, and in the late autumn rouged its faded cheeks with the red of the virginia creeper. But beneath veil and rouge you found the eternal boarding-house.

Now, as Hugh Robjohn entered the garden, he saw, for the first time in his life, a tree. Indeed, he saw many trees, and the magical wonder of blossom. Hitherto an oleander bush had been but a blur of pink. Now he saw it magically changed into swarms of delicately hovering butterflies. And the bamboos took on a sudden feathery grace, the camphor laurels became magic tents of tender green, and the old grey gums lifted their shining parachutes of dull bronze as if they were eager to be wafted from earth.

Indeed, they were wonderful spectacles.

Now he nerved himself for the final test. He entered the boarding-house. He let himself into the straight funnel of a passage that called itself a

hall, blocked on both sides by inconceivably ugly hall-stands top-heavily corniced with imitation walnut. In the act of hanging his round black hat on a spare peg, he noted that the only other masculine headgear there displayed was his own straw hat. It struck him, for the first time, that he was the sole male in a boarding-house full of women. He recalled that the last of the other masculine boarders had departed three months earlier; and Hugh was so unobservant a person, so wrapped up in his own little interests, that he had not even noticed the fact of his solitary state. Yes . . . they were all women—and what interesting beings, now that he could distinguish one from another, women were! His step was brisk as he went upstairs to wash.

He came down, slightly perturbed, to lunch. This being a holiday, he was home to lunch. He did not remember having had a boarding-house lunch before. And, as he entered the long dining-room, he saw that he was late.

Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch were already busy with their plates, while the landlady, Mrs. Fitzherbart (accent on the last syllable, or you got cold toast for breakfast), was genially presiding. Mrs. Fitzherbart was stout and unctuous, and extremely ladylike. In an earlier age—the age with which she was contemporaneous at breakfast, though by dinner time she was quite

modern—her manner would have been termed quite genteel. She had “come down in life,” but had come down genteely. She was making more money in her adversity than the defunct, or mislaid, Mr. Fitzherbart (also with the accent) had ever provided her with. She was hearty in a ladylike way, insisting on two helpings of the Sunday poultry, but bitter and tenacious in little matters concerning extras. But further description is unnecessary; the eternal sameness of boarding-houses presupposes the same boarding-house keepers.

Mrs. Fitzherbart, Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch raised simultaneous eyes as Hugh entered. The glitter of his new glasses held them entranced. Amid a telepathic exchange of questions from the corners of their eyes Hugh took his seat.

And, entrenched behind his spectacles, Hugh was reconnoitring a new universe. As through a telescope a new bright world had swum into his view—inhabited chiefly by spinsters.

Hitherto he had taken them in a lump. Now he was able not only to discern a difference between Miss Flegg and Miss Swatts, but to notice that—in a weak, watery way—Miss Catch was almost pretty. (They were wonderful glasses!) He noticed that Miss Swatts was a youngish old maid. Miss Flegg was an oldish old maid. Miss Flegg, who was understood to have investments, even to own a terrace,

looked like a little hopping bird, eagerly pecking at her crumbs. Miss Swatts, in the millinery, was in her official black, so laboriously and lavishly elaborate that Hugh had the idea that, as on week-days she could not emerge from her sombre chrysalis, at least she could so decorate her chrysalis that it almost gave her the appearance of possessing a lovely pair of wings. On Sundays she fluttered airily in mauve, and her antennæ, disguised as a hat, were of lordly purple. However, she had no airs. Miss Flegg had; but then Miss Flegg had given up hope. Miss Swatts, shyly, had not; and her antennæ quivered every Sunday with a delicious, though vague, surmise. You never could tell; she might meet him in church.

Miss Littledick was a school-teacher—not at all the school-teacher of romance. Teaching to her was a business, and children merely the uninteresting bricks with which she built up her “screw.” Her hard, practical face was lit by eyes, as Hugh saw now for the first time, that held in them a hard, practical humour. Hugh almost felt that Miss Littledick disguised a feminine heart of sympathy behind her grim spectacles. He wondered if she, too, could see a new world through those glasses—a world where, instead of teaching a hundred children, she could let one teach her.

And Miss Catch, who had drifted in nobody knew whence, except that she had come, as Mrs. Fitz-

herbart had proclaimed with pride, with an introduction and recommendations, and who did nothing all day but read scraps of novels and turn the pages of futile little magazines, who moved vaguely through life, too languid to be bored, who knew each day but as a tiring passage to be got through, and who spent most of her afternoons mooning about the city streets, blankly held by the lure of wide shop windows—even Miss Catch, in her faded, irritable way, was vaguely pretty.

Hugh felt that if only a man—any man—came along and married her, she would develop into a good wife and a jealous mother. At present she was at a loose end, brought into the world with but one talent. She was—and had been too long—in the deadwater that waits for every girl that does not go off in her third season. The only thing that interested her was Man, and Man was not interested in her. She had been born without much sex; she did not possess that primitive attraction which is, after all, Nature's most reliable expedient for the continuation of the race. And Nature may have had a purpose in withholding her greatest of gifts. Nature may not have regarded Miss Catch as a desirable mother. So Miss Catch was being quietly passed by in the struggle for existence—which, in her maiden mind, meant the struggle for a man. There were so many others more worthy. But while Nature is always far-sighted and wise, she has no

sympathy to waste upon those she cannot use in her work. She thinks for the race: she does not consider the question of individuals. Miss Catch was but a piece of thistledown tumbled on the bitter wind. Her chance of finding a pleasant anchoring-place, where she could grow, was small. So, unconsciously, she drifted on.

All this Hugh had vaguely seen before. It had appeared to him from his high, detached, masculine standpoint as rather funny—the antics of wriggling insects impaled on a pin. Now he saw the boarding-house as a tragedy—a pitiable tragedy. Not only Miss Catch, but all the others, had been baulked of their meaning by Nature. Life had brutally or incomprehendingly or carelessly brushed them aside. They were stranded on the muddy banks of the big, tumultuous, triumphant stream. They could lie there, in peace, perhaps, and watch the others swirling past. They had no griefs or sorrows, perhaps, except the long aching grief that they had no sorrows, no remembrances of foolish, passionate, mad, impossible things. In their haven how they envied those others, how they scanned every morning the births and marriage notices in the paper, and how they discussed engagements and possible engagements! They were the spectators; and though they were safe in their comfortable seats, and could see how, in the arena of Life, love tore and mutilated the combatants, yet how they envied the chance

to enter that arena and face the raging lions!

Hugh felt a surge of indignation against Life. The whole business was crudely and cruelly arranged. A business man would not have allowed this waste. Nature, blind, insistent, callous, did not care . . . . .

And the most pitiable part of the tragedy was that these women did not know of it, did not feel it, dared not allow themselves to look at it . . . . .

But perhaps in the night—in the long, lonely night—they wakened, and saw and yearned . . . until the soft balm of sleep sent them back into slumber—to dream of little, helpless babies . . . . .

## CHAPTER III

IN WHICH HUGH'S LIFE IS WRECKED, AND MISS  
CATCH PUTS ON A NEW BLOUSE

**A**LL through that lunch the conversation had been spasmodic. The boarding-house had been stunned. But as Hugh closed the door behind him on his way to his room, Babel broke out.

"Fancy Mr. Robjohn in spectacles!"

"How well he looks in them!"

"Distangay!"

"Quite the professor, *I* say."

"And how young he looks!"

"And his eyes! Did you see his eyes?"

They all confessed they had.

"Quite bright—like a baby's," Miss Flegg stated.

They discussed babies' eyes for a quarter of an hour.

"It's those glasses," said Mrs. Fitzherbart, reluctantly turning to the subject.

"I had no idea that he had such a nice nose," purred Miss Swatts.



"What a splendid inspector of schools he would make!" sighed Miss Littledick.

"What a pity he doesn't——" began Miss Swatts, with an audacity that could only be explained by the excitement of the moment, and every woman finished the sentence in her mind.

They agreed that he was just the right age—handsome too, and not at all a nuisance in the house. If only he would begin to sit up and take notice!

"It isn't as if there weren't plenty to choose from," said Miss Swatts shyly.

And every woman looked self-conscious, while Miss Catch, who was pretty in a lukewarm, diluted way, flushed.

The subject dropped, like a stone in mud. It touched too tremulous chords in these virgin hearts. It was one of the indiscussable things that had filled their lives since Hugh's shy advent. Miss Swatts' rash hint of it left them trembling. Profane footsteps had broken into the jealously guarded shrines of her listeners' souls.

Miss Littledick came to the rescue by a narrative of the benefit she derived from wearing spectacles.

Meanwhile Hugh sat in his small bed-sitting-room upstairs. It was like any other bed-sitting-room in a boarding-house, except that it had a small writing-table in it and three bookcases packed with all the

sprightly things the world had ever written about economics. On the table were many sheets of manuscript, note-books and writing materials. Here it was that the great book on "National Economics" was being incubated. Hugh permitted himself to think that in the future the world would look back with a great reverence on this insignificant room. So far, however, the world had shown no knowledge of its whereabouts. But in two years' time! He reckoned that the book would be finally revised by then. The pile of manuscript, already so high, represented but the vague adumbration of the great work. From these interminable notes and calculations he would have to produce a compact little volume of 600 pages, including graphs. Hugh was great on graphs—which are wobbly lines drawn on paper ruled in squares, from which, despite their repellent appearance, you could prove anything. Hugh found the wobbles of the lines entrancingly fascinating.

He lit his pipe, and picked up the manuscript of his opening chapter, and—ignoring the specialist's orders—set to work to read it over. This had always been a labour of love with him. He had thrilled at that opening chapter, with its masterly summary of his magnificent theory, even when he had made out the writing with difficulty. Now, with these new spectacles . . . . .

Yes, it was clearer, indubitably clearer. The

sentences shone sharp and brilliant upon the paper. He was surprised to find how easy it was to read it.

If only the world . . . . . !

And then he paused : a vague feeling of dissatisfaction slowly came over him. It wasn't so clear, after all. The writing was all right, but the meaning of it looked unfamiliar, almost distorted. His arguments, through these spectacles, seemed to lose themselves in vagueness. He had not expressed himself so clearly as he had confidently believed—or was it only the strangeness of reading his work through glasses? How often, before, had he read that chapter over, and how often he had felt the quick thrill of satisfaction that was almost exaltation as he finished the masterly outline of his theory! Now he was perturbed. The logic seemed to be unreliable, the expression unaccountably vague. The glamour of the whole chapter seemed to have gone. It seemed to have got out of focus. It must be, it could only be, those new spectacles.

He pushed the manuscript pettishly away and examined the glasses. They were not in the least bit blurred. Hopefully he carefully replaced them on his nose, and picked up the manuscript again. The writing glared at him, as it were, with a devilish intelligence—horribly sharp for the ideas it was meant to express. The meaning wasn't there.

It took him some time, and a little heart-sickness, before he permitted himself to recognise the dreadful

truth. It was not the glasses, but his Work, that was out of focus. His spectacles, with their brilliant exactness, had shown him the truth about his book—the truth that his blurred vision had never before been able to discover. He had all along been on the wrong tack. All his labour had been in vain. His Work, the work of his life, was valueless.

He pushed the manuscript wearily, yet tenderly, from him, and patiently went over his theory in his mind. It might yet be true, if only he could express it better. And, before, he had taken its truth as axiomatic. Now it would have to be proved, step by step, all over again. And he would have to make the world see it—not as he had seen it, but as the glasses had shown it to him. He had, from the first, been labouring in the dark; and now that the blinding light had come, he saw his treasured Work but a botch, a misshapen and futile thing, its flaws horribly gaping. It was terrible.

That book had sustained him for so many eager years: it had been the one thing, he had foolishly believed, that differentiated him from his fellows, his sole claim to a separate pride. And now the crutch had slipped from him, and he must painfully limp through the rest of his life—with the others. It was a stunning blow. Had he been a woman he would have wept, and, certainly, been comforted. But, being a man, he put his head down on his arm and remained in a long agony of mind.

When he looked up there was in his eyes behind those cruel glasses a new look. His book, his thrice-blessed theory, the sole child of his brain, was worthless! No matter. All the more reason why he should write that book again—with his new vision. Those vague, blurred things he had termed ideas were gone. Now, with the help of his new glasses, he would write a new book. His bandages were off, and though the slipping of them had brought cruel hurt to his eyes, he was glad that the operation had been performed. Now, as never before, he felt sure of himself. The world would see!

He spent the rest of the afternoon tearing into minute rectangular fragments the notes and manuscript that were once to have built his big theory of "National Economics." He swept them into the grate; he had swept his mind clear. Now!

But he found that this afternoon he could not begin his new book. He wanted time to reconstruct himself. He was surprised when the dinner-gong went.

At dinner he noted that Miss Catch—the girl who was pretty in a weak, watery way—had a new blouse on. It rather became her. And Miss Catch had intercepted his glance at it. It was not only Miss Catch who suddenly blushed. And all through the dinner she was lightly fingering and femininely patting the blouse. Hugh could not help noticing

her movements, and the other women watched his interest with guarded eyes. Things in the boarding-house promised quite a lot of excitement. The spectators shyly simmered with interest.

So much, in this prosaic world of ours, a new blouse may do!

## CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH HUGH ENTERS THE PORTALS  
OF FAIRYLAND

**Y**ES, they were certainly Chinese lanterns—a long string of them, swaying among the trees of the garden.

Hugh blinked his eyes, wondering if it were only a trick of his new spectacles. Now, what were Chinese lanterns doing in the boarding-house garden?

He had gone up to his room after dinner to smoke, and stood at his window wondering.

Oh yes, it was Christmas Eve, and he remembered Miss Flegg saying something about the illuminations on the bay. He had not had a Christmas Eve at Mosman, and had only heard vaguely of its annual Venetian evening.

Sydney, possessing the most beautiful harbour in the world, had, like a man married to a beautiful woman, staled to its undying charm. On the shores of that curved and indented bay the blind new-comers had pell-mell placed a great city. They were blinded to its beauty by their instant apprecia-

tion of its commercial possibilities, the depth of its water, its size, its shelter, and its accessibility. So, in a strange land, with pioneer eyes that could not see beauty in this land of grey and bronze-green, the owners of the land had no dreams of the æsthetic value of so wonderful a site, nor the great modern city that should dominate it.

Its incomparable foreshores were granted out for farms. Its meandering dray-routes became narrow and tortuous streets. Its water-gate became a collection of mean ferry-wharves. The avenue that should have led straight from the wharves of the ocean liners to the heart of the city was blocked with huddled buildings and confused little streets. The harbour was disfigured with advertisement hoardings, and no boulevards encircled it.

But gradually a civic pride awakened; and the advertisements had to go. Then eyes were miraculously opened to see the beauty of night illumination. It was discovered that a ferry-boat was a torch of loveliness. Some bold spirit determined to try the effect of a carnival night. It was in Mosman Bay that the first practical experiment was made. One Christmas Eve the residents of the bay lit their gardens with Chinese lanterns. By next Christmas Eve the display attracted thousands of spectators from the other suburbs, congested the ferry traffic, and turned the long narrow inlet into a riot of beauty.



And now the row of Chinese lanterns between the bamboos struck Hugh as extraordinarily beautiful. Remember, he saw Chinese lanterns for the first time. Across the narrow inlet all the houses and gardens were picked out with globes of light. He stared, fascinated, at this riot of swinging moons. He was loath to go back to the first chapter of the new "National Economics."

A knock at the door roused him from his muse. Charlie Leggett entered boisterously. He alone among all Hugh's friends refused to take Hugh's great book seriously. But then Charlie never took anything—not even girls—seriously.

"Come on, old chap! Shove that rotten manuscript away. Fancy scribbling on Christmas Eve! I've got a boat, and the girl I was going to take out has got the influenza—or another fellow—but I'm not going to miss the fun. So get a move on!"

At any other time Hugh would have wearily refused on the plea of work. But he felt it would be impossible to work with those tinted moons laughing and dancing just outside his window. And, as always, he was amused and interested in the breeziness of Charlie Leggett, his junior in the office, whose one ambition was to be the owner of an eighteen-footer. At present he was but a one-fifth owner, and had to do most of the cleaning of the yacht. Hugh reached for his hat.

"We'll just mouch about in my skiff," Charlie

explained. "I say, there isn't anything juicy in the way of girls at this boarding-house, is there, that we could fetch along?"

Hugh mentally ran over the femininity of the house, and reluctantly admitted that they had not the requisite juiciness. He had forgotten all about Miss Catch's new blouse, the cost and construction of which she was now explaining to the envious drawing-room.

"The bay is full of girls," Charlie rippled on. "Girls in boats, girls in launches, girls in canoes—girls, girls, girls! With a little luck we'll have a full passenger list in half an hour."

Hugh put on his straw with a laugh—it was surprising how easy it was to laugh with those new spectacles—and they went into fairyland. The whole side of Cremorne was lit with Chinese lanterns; and in the bay an old barge, moored in mid-stream, dropped a rain of rippling reflections into the water. This was the focus of interest. On it was a piano and a choir of women; and from it already came, sweet across the water, the refrain of a Christmas carol. And everywhere the water was paved with the lights of motor-launches, and rowing-boats that, garlanded with bobbing lanterns, pushed and nosed their way from wharf to barge and shore. Cremorne was black with a throng of thousands of spectators. And over all, rising up into the deep lilac and pale green of the Australian

evening sky, were laughter and "cooees" and greetings.

Soon they were in the midst of the crowd of boats, their little string of lanterns lost in the brilliant lights of the bigger launches. From launch to launch they passed, with shouted welcomes to Charlie from every second one. No one seemed to recognise Hugh. Perhaps it was his new spectacles. But through them Hugh could see—oh, what couldn't he see?

If that morning he was looking for the first time at life, now he had his first glimpse of romance.

The lanterns, under the gentle teasing breeze, swayed on their loose strings, dancing quaint quadrilles with each other, like a crowd of intoxicated moons, to the tune of a woman's voice on the barge. Picnic suppers were spread out on the launches, and camp-fires flamed on the shores, and banjos twanged, and far-off gramophones across the water sounded even musical. And here and there coloured fires lit up the shores with a sudden, fantastic, deep-etched brilliance.

But though Charlie invited and cajoled, none of the girls in the launches could be persuaded to trust themselves to his skiff. Somewhat surprised, and certainly sulky, Charlie pulled out of the crush toward the head of the bay where the yachts were moored.

"It's those glaring spectacles of yours, old chap," he sulkily said. "They're like searchlights. Enough to scare off a widow. Whatever do you want to wear those window-panes for?"

Hugh explained that with them he saw better. He did not explain how much better.

Suddenly Charlie swung round in his seat. "Look out!" he cried. "We'll be run down! Where 'yer going, there?"

It was a lean little motor launch he hailed. Garlanded with lanterns, it was silently sneaking upon them. An accident was imminent.

A couple of quick strokes, a swerve on the part of the launch, and the danger was over. But the next moment the launch, in avoiding them, had quickly impaled itself upon the bowsprit of a moored, unlighted yacht.

Hugh heard the crush of splintered glass as the bowsprit stuck itself through the little cabin window; but that noise was for ever obliterated from his mind by the thing that followed.

It was a woman's scream.

Already Charlie had brought the boat to the launch's side. On the cabin floor, still clutching the tiny wheel, Hugh saw a girl. And there was blood on her cheek.

As he leapt on board, Hugh's eyes took in the presence of a man at the bow of the launch, vainly attempting to separate the two vessels. Hugh

bent over the girl, and lifted her to the seat of the cabin.

And oh, how soft and wonderful and white she was !

(This is the place for you, hardened reader, to snort. Of course she was beautiful. Every heroine in every novel is beautiful. Well, aren't there enough beautiful girls in the world to go round—one to each novel? And, really, this girl was beautiful enough for a hundred novels—or perhaps it was the effect solely of the spectacles through which he saw her. Certainly she was wondrous beautiful to him. But if he saw her without his spectacles? Perhaps, later on, he did.)

What Hugh saw, as she lay almost in his arms, was a slight, soft thing of white. But her hair was a glory of ruddy, fiery bronze. And from her dead-white cheek a trickle of scarlet flowed. It seemed to his excited nerves as beautiful as a flame-tree in the moonlight. He dabbed it with his handkerchief, and a tiny scratch, probably from a splinter of the shattered glass, marred the soft symmetry of that cheek. The dead whiteness of it had a beauty of its own, but Hugh saw through his spectacles that with the return to consciousness—for, surely, so beautiful a thing could not die!—her cheek would still retain its delicate clear pallor. And though the obvious, indeed the clamant, thing to do was to get her out of the faint, Hugh did not do it. He

held her warm and soft and helpless a moment longer in his arms. It was culpable negligence, perhaps—but wouldn't you?

It was Charlie who spoiled it all. The figure in the bow was too absorbed in his efforts to disentangle the two boats even to look round. Charlie climbed aboard.

"She's fainted," he explained. "Don't hold her up, you fool! Put her head down. Here . . . ."

A handful of water splashed on the girl's face—and also over Hugh's spectacles. He saw her through the drops aureoled with strange halos of Chinese lanterns. But he did not put her down.

The shock aroused her.

She opened strange eyes, gazed complacently at Hugh's spectacles, and, with a little low chuckle of divine content, snuggled closer to him.

Hugh sat rigid, afraid to move.

But heaven cannot be vouchsafed to mortals on earth for more than a moment at a time. The girl opened those strange eyes and shuddered back into her conscious self.

"Oh!" she said in consternation, sitting up.

Her eyes took in the ruddy handkerchief in Hugh's hand. One slim finger went to her cheek and came away red.

"Will it disfigure me?" she asked in a shuddering awe.

"Only a scratch." Hugh comforted her distress.

"But a scratch will show!" she gave her dismal verdict.

"Not in a week's time."

"A week! I'll have to go a week like this!" There was tragedy in her tone.

"A bit of sticking-plaster——"

"On my face—o-oh!" She shuddered. "And the scar——!"

"It's nothing—really nothing!"

"Get me my hand-bag, quick!" she commanded, sitting very straight, and looking down sideways at this strange man.

It wasn't Bert, then! But where was Bert? Drowned? She glanced round, but at that moment Hugh put her hand-bag in her lap. Bert, drowned or not, could wait.

She clutched the bag and pulled from it a small object. And by the light of the swinging ship's lantern in the cabin she inspected herself critically in her pocket mirror.

Thank Heaven! "Only a teeny-weeny scratch!"

A little more powder, and nobody would know—unless anybody kissed her. Well, she wouldn't be kissed for a week. She could easily manage that for a week. She sighed happily and looked round for the drowned Bert.

He was standing outside the broken cabin window, leaning down, an interested spectator.

"Oh," said the girl contentedly, "so you're all right, Bert? I thought you were drowned, leaving me like that!"

"It'll cost me a fiver—these windows, and I'll have to pay for the damage to the yacht. But they should have had a light. Danger to navigation, eh? Hullo, dear, you're scratched?"

"A bit," said the girl, industriously dabbing. "Oh, and it's your handkerchief!" She looked from the handkerchief to its owner.

"It doesn't matter—only—only an old one," Hugh muttered, embarrassed, overcome by the direct gaze of those strange eyes. He had never seen eyes that colour before.

"Well, thanks for happening along," said the young man called Bert. "These yachts ought to have riding-lights. Ought to be some regulation about them. But we'd better be getting back, dear. The show's over."

The hint was obvious. The only person who took no notice of it was the girl.

"I didn't see the bowsprit," she explained. "I didn't know yachts had them always. And I thought I could steer!"

"Oh, you can steer all right. It wasn't your fault. I could go for them for not having lights. . . But you'll come out again, dear?"

"You bet," said the girl. Then, turning to



Hugh, she murmured a good-night. "And thanking you for looking after me," she softly added, giving him a straight glance from those wonderful eyes.

Hugh gobbled a good-evening, and they cast off—into the night.

Charlie and Hugh watched the launch slowly gather way and slip off with its lanterns rocking in the breeze.

The girl was once more standing at the wheel.

"Wonder who she is?" asked Hugh, feeling a strange fever of blood on his cheeks.

"Don't know," said Charlie cheerfully. "I've seen her about in Sydney somewhere. Sort of face you can't help noticing. Say, Robjohn, she can use her eyes."

"And what eyes!" said Hugh.

"Sort of curious colour." Charlie spoke absently, busy at the sculls.

"The colour?—the colour?" cried Hugh. "Her hair was ruddy—ruddy gold, and her eyes . . . honey-coloured, perhaps. Red? No. Gold? Um . . . no, they've got too much fire in them . . . Amber! Yes, amber, with a hotness in them. I say, Charlie, you don't know her name?"

"Not much; but I think I could guess the sort of girl she is. You don't have that sort of eyes if you're a Primitive Methodist."

“What sort of girl?” asked Hugh impatiently.

He had never before conceived that girls were of any particular sorts. They were just girls.

“What sort?” laughed Charlie scornfully. “Hot stuff!”

## CHAPTER V

### IN WHICH THE BOARDING-HOUSE GOES TO BED

**T**HE boarding-house, when Hugh returned to it, was already in darkness. The inhabitants had gone to bed.

This fact, however, must not be cursorily passed over by the mere mention of it. For going to bed with Miss Flegg, Miss Swatts, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch was no mere incident ; it was a ritual, an event. There was plenty of time in their days—there was really too much time ; and going to bed had become for them all the slow climax of the drawn-out day. They went to bed elaborately.

A man whips off his clothes and tumbles into bed ; but for Miss Flegg, Miss Swatts, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch going to bed had become a ceremony. They had so many little personal possessions to put carefully away—each in its sacred niche. They had their hair so carefully to brush ; they had their faces so conscientiously to scrutinise in the mirror ; they had their dressing-tables so neatly to arrange. And their method of undressing

was always unvaried, and carried out with a deliberation that made it a solemn rite. And there were always pauses in between—pauses in which they vaguely thought, or mooned, or sighed, or wondered. And, for the invariable finale, there was always the Man to be sought for, with a hasty peering and a shiver of delightful fear, underneath the bed.

And from the opposite side of the bay a watcher would have seen each night at ten o'clock four contiguous windows suddenly, softly lit. Then three-quarters of an hour later the four windows would almost simultaneously darken, and he would know that Miss Flegg, Miss Swatts, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch, in elaborate open-work nightgowns—which they showed with pride to each other—were carefully composing themselves to innocent slumber.

Having thus with proper ceremony put Miss Flegg, Miss Swatts, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch to bed, let us turn to Hugh. He went to bed, but not to sleep.

For the first time in his life he had looked upon Woman, and he found her good. He was dazzled by the vision vouchsafed to him by his marvellous spectacles. To think that all these years he had lived in blindness! That girl with the amber eyes must have passed him in the streets of Sydney a dozen times, and he had seen her not. She might have been sitting next him on the ferry-boat yesterday; and she would have been for him only a

pleasantly contoured blur. In that sudden vision of her beneath the bobbing lanterns all the rest of her sex had been obliterated. He recalled, with a contemptuous smile, that only that day at lunch he had thought Miss Catch, in a lukewarm and diluted way, pretty. Miss Catch! It was a profanation to think of her beside that radiant other.

For it was the radiance of her that amazed him. There was a richness in those honey-coloured eyes, a softness and an allure in the curves of her body, that spoke to him of vitality, of lushness, of some magnificent promise. She was Youth. Not plump—he decided the question with anxious deliberation. Certainly not skinny—just a ripeness of curve, a softness exquisitely and appealingly feminine.

And just as he had arrived at this momentous decision he recalled that the youth with her, the youth whom she had addressed familiarly as “Bert,” had called her “Dear.”

Hugh did not like that. Yes, twice she had called him “Dear.” Now, who were the people who called each other “Dear”? Married people. But she was surely not married. He was certain of that. Why, he could not have told. Engaged? Yes. But, somehow, he could not imagine her as engaged to that scrap of ordinariness called “Bert.” It seemed to him a sacrilege that would not have been permitted by the high gods. And if not engaged to him, what was the relationship that had

brought them so intimately together? Brother and sister? No, that was a sacrilege too. Well, then?

He gave it up, till Charlie's comment came singing back into his ears. "Hot stuff!"

That phrase sent a thrill of distaste shuddering through him. It was as if he had sucked up from his pipe a drop of nicotine. In Hugh's virginal mind the phrase connoted "fast" girls, or women even faster. Hugh had his ideal of womenkind—as we all have had, as those of us still unmarried still may have. Those of us who are married have something infinitely better—they have the woman. Woman to him—and, knowing nothing of the being, he was always curiously thinking of her—was an ethereal thing remote from a world of men. About her head was always an aureole of mystery; she floated past his comprehension faintly veiled in rose and pink. She was a divinity to be worshipped with bent head—a being of a thousand uncomprehended refinements, subtleties and nuances robed in the purple and sacred magnificence of her sex. A mere man could only adore. She might bend to him, but it was an act of almost incomprehensible condescension. She was the light around which the blundering and dazzled moths from the darkness for ever fluttered, and her frown was a glad death, her smile a glorious resurrection.

In short, Hugh Robjohn looked on woman through the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson.

That Woman was but the other half of his masculine world, a being with a human and spiritual appetite like himself, a thing with emotions and understanding like his, a human soul craving another human soul, a part of this commonplace life of ours, moving, like Man, along the common highway of the world—all this would have seemed to this philosopher in spectacles a profanation and a sacrilege.

Hugh admitted that this, his ideal, did not apply to a section of the other sex. These were the bad women. He brushed them away from his vision; they marred the pure and refined beauty of his worshipped ideal. He could not understand how these bad women had once been little innocent children. He could not have lumped Woman into one class, as he was able to lump Man, with the same qualities, good and bad, only in a different degree ranging through the sex. No; in his conception of Woman he wiped out the failures, and, from that obliteration, turned with a more devout worship to the Woman of his ideal. You see, his education had begun wrong: he had not started off by kissing a woman.

So, in his judicial consideration of the girl with the amber eyes he put quite aside the possibility of her being bad. Wild, fast, "hot stuff"? Surely that meant only that she was young, beautiful, full of life. She *must* be good, because he was in love with her!

There, it was out! He thrilled at the thought. And, desperately, he did not care—did not care for anything nor anybody, not even “National Economics”! He had held her in his arms. She had looked up at him with those strange, slow eyes, and snuggled closer. He would seek her out, capture her and marry her.

But he had not the remotest idea whom she was or where to find her. He never even considered the possibility that when he found her she might run away. You see how dangerous it is to give a blind man spectacles!

And in the midst of his heroics—at which, if you are young, you may smile, but at which, if you are middle-aged, you will smile wistfully—he remembered his handkerchief.

*She* had it. *She* had kept it. And . . . yes, it had his name in the corner, his full name punctiliously marked in his neat and scholarly handwriting. *She* knew his name.

He went to sleep happy, infinitely comforted by this insignificant fact.

But when a man is in love, is not the slightest fact concerning the girl incredibly significant?



## CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH HUGH'S CHRISTMAS DINNER DISAGREES  
WITH HIM

NEXT day being Christmas Day, Hugh woke to the disturbing fact that he was expected to consume a large dinner in the middle of the day. And he hated anything but a cup of tea and a scone for lunch.

Great preparations had been made by Mrs. Fitzherbart; for, for the first time in the history of "Arden," all the boarders would be "home" for Christmas dinner. Miss Flegg had contemplated dining festively with her four bleak nieces; but she had caught a cold the night before, looking at the illuminations, and deemed it unwise at her age to venture out. She preferred to sniff at home, where handkerchiefs and eucalyptus were handy.

Miss Swatts, of the millinery, was debarred from going home to her mother by the fact that that lady lived in outback Queensland, and it would take her twelve days' travelling by train and buggy to and fro, and the shop could not grant her a fortnight's

holiday. So she merely put on her most festive pink, determined that at least she should do her best to contribute to the gaiety of the occasion.

Miss Littledick had, frankly, nowhere else to go. She said it with a defensive smile; but she had the advantage over Miss Catch. The faintly pretty Miss Catch had talked much of a visit to her "boy's" relatives; but as nobody had ever seen her "boy" or his relatives, this story was received with a visual sniff. (The visual sniff is an acrobatic performance at which all women are born adepts. It is a quick glance of the eyes that conveys the pleasing illusion of a sniff. You can practice it easily before a glass.) And Miss Catch's announcement that morning that it was too hot altogether to go to Hunter's Hill till after dinner was received with the same visual sniff.

She had really been going to her much-married sister's for dinner, but the fact that Mr. Robjohn was staying for dinner put all other thoughts out of her vague and fluffy mind. At Christmas dinners you pulled crackers and drank toasts. Who knows if Mr. Robjohn mightn't pull a cracker with her?

The ladies spent the morning getting elaborately dressed, so they were thoroughly, almost feverishly, happy. But as dinner was late they gathered on the wide verandah, waiting for the gong and discussing Mr. Robjohn's spectacles. Miss Littledick,

who bravely and gallantly wore pince-nez, remarked :

"They give him such an intellectual look, don't they?"

"A pity he has to take to spectacles so early," said Miss Flegg. "Thank heaven, *my* eyes are all right." She beamed on Miss Littledick's pince-nez.

"There are some faces glasses improve," snapped that lady. "Others *nothing* could improve!"

"I like them very much," purred Miss Catch; "but I do wish he didn't have to wear them. They hide his beautiful eyes."

The other women cast a quick glance at Miss Catch, and a quicker glance of understanding at each other. That look was the gleam in the eyes of the panther when it comes across a footprint in the jungle. There was game ahead for the tracking! And Miss Catch's bedroom was next door to Mr. Robjohn's!

Then the gladsome dinner-gong went, and they hastened, with ostentatious slowness, into the long dining-room. The table was gaily decorated, and beside each plate was one of those gaudy, crinkly things that when pulled go off with a report and disclose a paper cap. Hugh recalled them from his boyhood.

It was a gay dinner. Outside, the city lay sweltering in the midsummer heat, and inside the

darkened room—for the blinds had been mercifully drawn against the bitter sun—flies clustered and crawled, and the boarders steadily ate. Mrs. Fitzherbart played the hostess with a joviality that sat uncomfortably on her shrewd and pulpy features. She encouraged the repassing up of plates—for the turkey had been bought, and in this awful weather you couldn't depend on keeping any meat. But beneath the general sparkle of gaiety there ran a hidden stream of remembrance. The minds of each of the women ran back to other Christmas dinners, Christmases when they were young, at home with the family, when there were presents and dreams and ambitions, and the long look forward of youth. This was but a make-believe, a memory, a ghost.

Miss Swatts leant forward and offered a cracker to Miss Flegg to pull, and the others peered excitedly as Miss Flegg extracted a paper fool's-cap and placed it on the thin covering of her hair-frames. They all agreed that it became her; and immediately there was a fusillade of crackers, and each woman decorated herself with a grotesque paper head-dress. Then an extraordinary thing happened.

Miss Catch offered her cracker to Mr. Hugh. Blushing, he pulled it. She was already wearing a Napoleonic field-marshal's hat; and Hugh noted, with a little surprise, how pretty her dull hair looked beneath it.

From the cracker Hugh extracted a tiny packet of paper. Clumsily opening it, he felt Miss Catch's fingers on his.

"Oh, you'll tear it!" she cried. "Let me open it."

It turned out to be a Grecian helmet, and to the shocked consternation of the household Miss Catch deliberately placed it on Hugh's head.

(In private conversation afterwards, during Miss Catch's absence, the conclusion of the ladies was that Miss Catch was a designing cat. "Such impudence to a gentleman like Mr. Robjohn!" was the final verdict, only dissented from by Miss Swatts, who put it mercifully down to the claret cup. The committee for the management of Miss Catch's affairs felt that their office was going to be no sinecure.)

In the midst of this hilarious excitement the knell of doom abruptly sounded. It was the telephone bell.

The telephone had been placed, with a consideration rare in boarding-houses, on the dining-room wall. This arrangement gave a pleasing publicity to the private affairs of the boarders. If you could not hear what the minx on the other end of the wire said, at least you could hear *his* answers. And from his remarks you could infer—oh, all sorts of things. The committee for the management of other boarders' affairs were skilled at inferences.

Mrs. Fitzherbart went to the 'phone—and the dining-room listened. The brandy on the pudding flickered and died. Flies committed a lingering and sticky sort of suicide in the cream. But a hush held all the room, and each woman was ready to rush to the expected summons.

"It's for you, Mr. Robjohn," said the landlady, with dramatic intensity. Then, as she relinquished the receiver, she added her astonishing fact, "A woman's voice!"

It *was* a woman's voice—a charming voice. "Is that you?" it asked in Hugh's ear.

"Who's speaking?" asked Hugh, in a tone which he foolishly strove to keep businesslike. The voice recalled memories, recent memories.

"Oh, *you* know!" was the provoking reply.

"I don't. Really, I don't!" said Hugh. It was too much to expect that it might be her.

"Guess!" came the triumphant challenge.

Hugh remained silent.

"Is that Mr. Robjohn? Mr. Hugh Robjohn?"

"Yes. But who is it?"

Again that triumphant "Guess!"

Hugh desperately guessed. "It's not the girl in——"

He remembered in time. He had an audience—an eager and intent audience. It would not be wise to guess.

"The girl in what?" laughed the voice encouragingly.

"Oh," said Hugh, desperate, "who is it?"

"Guess!"

"I can't."

"Are there so many girls you have that you can't pick one out of the bunch? I'm surprised at you, really, Mr. Robjohn!" The voice was provocative, tantalising.

"You don't understand," muttered Hugh.

"I can't."

There were five cats behind his back. He could almost feel them scratching it.

"But you do know me. You haven't forgotten me so soon," the woman urged, after a slight consideration.

"I think I do."

"Of course you do. I'm the girl in the launch."

"Really! I say——!"

Hugh recollected the five cats in time. Their claws were bared.

"But you don't say," cooed the voice, a little disappointedly, it seemed, to his excited nerves.

"Because under the circumstances I can't," he said shortly.

"Circumspect young man!" his tormentor went on. "It's quite safe. I'm miles away. You can be as rash as you like. The wire won't give you away or bring me any closer!"

"But——" began Hugh.

Oh, if only he were in a public telephone box, with the door locked! What wouldn't he say? He felt five pair of eyes screwing into his back.

"Oh, well," said the voice, with a touch of temper in it, "if you can't be more conversational, I'll ring off. I just rang up to wish you a merry Christmas—and you seem to be having one! Oh, by the way, I've got your old handkerchief. I'd like to return it to you. Where could I see you to give it to you?"

Where? Hugh thought of a multitude of places. He might meet her at the Civil Service Stores and take her to afternoon tea; he might meet her on a ferry-boat; he might meet her that evening at Circular Quay and let her return it to him somewhere on the sea-shore at Manly, under the moon. He might—oh, where mightn't he meet her if it wasn't for those pointed ears that pricked his back? He thought wildly of asking her to call—no, not at the boarding-house, but at his office. But that would never do. Girls were not encouraged at Government offices, and it would get all round the office. How to arrange a meeting and yet not drop a hint to that army of ferocious panthers crouching intent behind?

"Are you there?" the woman's voice broke in, in terse, business-like tones.

"Yes, of course!" eagerly cried Hugh.



"Thought you'd rung off to get back to your dinner. I'm simply famishing for an ice! Well?"

No answer.

"Oh, I'll post the old thing to you. Good-bye—and merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" said Hugh dolorously; and the bell of doom tinkled.

He got back somehow to his seat, and, putting his hand to his wet brow, discovered that he was still a Grecian warrior. He declined strawberries and cream, and fled the room on the plea of work to do.

As the door closed behind him there was a unanimous and meaning "Well!" and then the deluge came.

"Who would have thought it of Mr. Robjohn?" said Miss Catch with pathos, conscious of the futility of her new blouse.

"I would have thought it. I *did* think it!" said Mrs. Fitzherbart solemnly. "I know men." She had married one.

Then the discussion overflowed. After all, they had not much to go upon. The facts in their possession were scant. The first one was: A woman—oh, surely young, and certainly fast. For who but a fast woman would have dared to ring up Mr. Robjohn in the privacy of his home? The second item was his interest in her. Else why had he been so confused? The third fact was that the

whole shameful affair was a secret, that had been going on right under their noses.

True, they had only fragments of a conversation to build on; but that—to the feminine mind—only lent it the greater charm. They went over the telephone talk in detail.

*“Who’s speaking?”*

“Shows he didn’t know her well,” said Miss Swatts.

“No; it shows he knew her very well, but he didn’t want us to know,” said Miss Flegg, from the heights of her superior experience.

*“I don’t—really I don’t!”*

“There! He didn’t recognise her at first—which only shows how many girls he must know if he couldn’t remember *her*.” Miss Catch’s voice was pathetic.

*“Yes, but who is it?”*

“You see,” cried Miss Littledick scornfully, “he knew all the time. He wanted to make sure. He wasn’t going to give himself away to the wrong woman.”

“That is just what he is doing,” sighed Miss Catch, suddenly taking a dislike to her new blouse. She mentally decided to get a handsome lace one next week if she had to go short in underclothes for a month.

*“It’s not the girl in——?”*

“In what?” asked the whole committee.

"In the pantomime," said Miss Swatts. "He was out last Thursday week, late. He must have seen her then."

"I can't understand what a man can see in those painted creatures," said Miss Catch.

"It's not what they see *in* them," said Miss Flegg with asperity; "it's what they see *of* them."

"They see such a lot," sighed Miss Swatts, with a wild revolt in her heart against the swathing tyranny of clothes.

Her best point, she knew, was her calves; and for all the use her calves were to her she might as well have had sticks—like Miss Flegg. She had a dumb fear that she would go to her grave without any eye, save her own, ever beholding those calves. (As a matter of fact, she did.)

"In what?"

"In the tram," hazarded Miss Swatts.

"I expect she pretended she had lost her purse," snapped Miss Littledick. "How a man could be taken in by such a——!"

"In the tea-room," Mrs. Fitzherbart interposed. "He had his lunch at the A B C—and those girls are always marrying the men they wait on."

"In what? In trouble," thought Miss Littledick, but she kept her surmise to herself.

The committee finally resolved that it was the pantomime girl, and made it an instruction to the

members to find out which pantomime girl, whether Mr. Robjohn went out to the theatre again and which theatre, whether she painted off as well as on the stage, whether she lived at home, and whether she was dark or fair.

"*Oh, who is it?*"

"You see, he must have stacks of girls."

"*I can't.*"

"Can't what? Can't love her?"

"Can't announce his engagement?"

"Can't fix the date?"

"Can't fight the other man?"

"Can't decide whether he loves her?"

"Can't help her to get a divorce?"

"Can't afford the ring?"

"Can't return her letters?"

Question left open for further investigation, when she rang up again. Perhaps Mr. Robjohn would be out, and they could get her to leave a message—or a telephone number—for him. Then . . . .!

"*You don't understand. I can't!*"

"She was pleading to him, and he refused!"

"*I think I do.*"

"What?"

"*Really, I say——*"

"Now she's told him all. Did you notice how his back straightened?"

"*Because, under the circumstances, I can't.*"

"The circumstances?" said Mrs. Fitzherbart.

"We were the circumstances. He didn't want us to hear. And after all our kindness to him, quite making him one of the family!"

"But you don't understand——"

"He was telling her that he's not to blame," Miss Flegg explained. "Every man says that."

*Long silence.*

"An attack of his conscience."

"Yes, of course."

"He said it hurriedly. She asked him if he still loved her."

"Merry Christmas!"

"They must have quarrelled. And yet he didn't say good-bye. He must be meeting her again. It's an old affair."

"And going on under our very eyes, and we never knew!"

They went over it again—for hours.

It was the most exciting Christmas they had ever spent.

## CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH HUGH'S HABITS SHOCKINGLY  
DETERIORATE

FOR a long month afterwards Hugh peered eagerly through his spectacles, but not one glimpse did they vouchsafe to him of the girl with the amber eyes. But in his search for that girl Hugh Robjohn, the bookish, retired, moonlight-souled student, shockingly deteriorated. He carelessly set aside his unwritten "National Economics" and took to nocturnal prowlings. Instead of quietly reading or feverishly writing in his tiny bed-sitting-room every evening, he made it the practice to wander the harbour on ferry-boats. The ladies of the boarding-house noticed his lapse.

"Not that we used to see very much of Mr. Robjohn any night," sighed Miss Flegg to the company.

She was writing her letters. She had a vast correspondence with nieces and cousins, and answered their letters with punctuality and precision, replying to every question and commenting

on every bit of news in them. In return she told them of her daily doings, whom she'd seen and how she looked, and what sort of dress she was wearing, rumours of possible, or impossible, engagements, rapturous chronicles of births or impending births, and full details of her treasure-trove from the sales and how she was going to make the articles up.

"He wasn't a sociable man at all," said Mrs. Fitzherbart, who was darning Hugh's socks. "Up there with his pipe and his books when he might be down here enjoying himself."

"Not that I don't admire him for his self-restraint," said Miss Catch, who was pretending to read a novel and wondering if she really would go to that end-of-the-season sale in the morning. "It isn't every young man who can tear himself away from feminine society to work of an evening. I must say," she modestly preened herself, "that none of the young men *I've* had to do with ever preferred a book and a pipe to me! But perhaps there's too many of us. Two's company, you know," she added, with what for Miss Catch was archness.

"There *are* too many of us," sighed Miss Littledick. "There are always too many of us in the world! And yet you hear of women who wish to have a baby-girl! It doesn't seem fair. If I was married I'd want a boy—and I wouldn't mind if he was twins!"

She took up her work again with a feverish eagerness. She was knitting a small garment she referred to as "pilchers." She had learnt only that day from one of her pupils that there was an addition—male—in that child's family. And as she eagerly knitted she wove in the stitches all her unwanted love of children, and pictured to herself the creased, fat limbs that the garment would keep warm.

"As for his pipe," said Miss Swatts, who was playing patience, "I'm sure we would allow him to smoke every evening in here. You must consider men's failings." She deliberated over a poised card, and put it on a little pack. She played an elaborate variety of this doleful game every evening, annoyed and exasperated when she could not get it out, and yet vaguely disappointed, with a sense of too easy achievement, when the cards were finally placed in order on their proper packs. On those rare occasions she felt grieved that there were no more worlds to conquer. "But now that he's out every evening, you never know what he's up to. When he was shut up in his room with his tobacco-smoke, at least we knew where he was—we had him with us, under our protection. But now——!"

"He's with that woman, night after night," said Miss Catch viciously. "He's probably kissing her *now!*"

Five shudders shook the room. Mrs. Fitzherbart



pricked her finger and angrily snapped the wool, leaving the hole but half darned.

"I can't be expected to darn all the holes," said Mrs. Fitzherbart with a snort. "The way he wears out his socks! And that was a new pair last Thursday fortnight!"

"Let me finish it," said Miss Catch brazenly.

And she did, undeterred by the knowledge that the others were putting two and two together, and with feminine mathematics arriving at a prodigious result.

But the evening of the others had been spoilt. And, after this, all their evenings were spoilt.

They would have been somewhat comforted if they had followed Hugh in his nightly excursions. He saw many pretty girls on the ferry-boats, but they had the normal hue in eyes—and in addition they were always accompanied by young men of their own. And though Hugh did not discover the girl, he discovered many other things—chiefly in the moonlit portions of the steamers. He arrived at a correct estimate of these ferries during the evenings: except for the theatre boats, they were solely for the use of lovers.

Then, after his futile search of a month, Hugh in one week saw her on the Watson ferry-boat on three different evenings—each time with a different man, and in none of these cases did he recognise the man as Bert.

The cumulative effect of this shock almost prostrated Hugh. He shuddered at the direction in which the damning facts pointed. And yet, after all, why shouldn't a pretty girl go down to Watson's Bay with a male friend? But she seemed to have such a catholicity of choice. The desire of the chase almost died out of him. Could it be true that, after all, she was "hot stuff"—in the warmest sense?

Any other man would have gone back to his books, but Hugh had seen her through those wonderful glasses. The touch of fantasy was upon him; and when Fantasy touches us with her gently caressing hand we are moon-maddened, lost. Hugh's ideal had become to him the sole thing worth while in a disappointing world. If he relinquished that ideal there was nothing left for him to live for. Surely, by now, it is apparent that Hugh Robjohn had become the abject slave of his wonderful spectacles.

On each of those momentous evenings the girl had shown no sign of recognition to Hugh, though he admitted she had been so engrossed in her companions that she might not have seen him. Yet, in the brief glances of her that Hugh had been fortunate enough to get, there was in her attitude to her young men a defensive aloofness that told him she was quite able to take care of herself, even with those wonderful eyes.

His handkerchief had come back to him two days after Christmas, in a little packet addressed to his boarding-house, with a scrap of paper enclosed, on which was written, "From the girl in the launch, with many thanks."

Nothing much to be got out of that? You do not know Hugh. He extracted from that plain statement a thousand delicious thoughts, too sacred for mention here. He reverently put the little packet away in a drawer. A handkerchief washed and ironed by her own pretty hands would never be profaned by a masculine nose.

And now, for a whole fortnight, he missed her on the Watson boat. He tried the other ferries, but without result. Then he met her again.

Hugh belonged to a little club of writers and artists known as "The Habituals," who met every fortnight, in the only Bohemian café in Sydney, to dine and talk. As a rule they did more talking than dining. There were geniuses and others in "The Habituals," but the geniuses predominated. The only rule of the club was that no member was ever to take anything—except himself—seriously; but on really important subjects, such as Baudelaire, this rule was waived. However, the club had little time for even Baudelaire, since it had so much to say upon the vaster subject of Woman. "The Habituals" knew all about Woman; and Hugh had, since his admittance, learnt much.

However, at this particular meeting of the club Hugh learnt more. As the weather was stifling, the door of the room in which they dined was opened wide, even at the risk of some portion of their knowledge of Woman filtering into the adjoining rooms. In the middle of a fierce discussion upon this important subject, Hugh, who was seated at the end of the table, glanced into the passage.

He saw the girl with the amber eyes, preceded by an obsequiously shuffling waiter, being escorted by a stout, red-faced man down the passage. They entered a private dining-room, and the waiter, reappearing, carefully closed the door. The click of the catch sounded to Hugh like a revolver shot in his heart.

That dinner was a purgatory to him. Every time the waiter entered the room he discreetly paused, knocked sharply, and even then waited before he gingerly turned the handle.

When Hugh left, that door was still closed. He walked blindly towards the quay, with a horrible picture ever before his eyes of that discreet waiter pausing before that closely shut door. In there—with that red-faced man!

Oh, surely any sane man would have given up the quest! But he had seen her through those magic spectacles; and once you have looked through the spectacles of fantasy are you ever after responsible? The only reason why Hugh and his

kind are not locked up in asylums is that all of us, at some time of our lives, have been as mad. And wouldn't we like to be as mad—just for an hour—*that* hour, do you remember?—again?

## CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH HUGH SEES THROUGH THE FOG

**T**HEN, a week later, came the night of the big fog. It was a clear, still night when Hugh, still hopeful, got on the ferry-boat for Watson's Bay. He drew a blank. At Watson's he decided to wait for the next boat in case she should be in that. He waited for two more.

When, disappointed, he boarded the ferry to return, the fog was already rolling in softly from the Pacific. The boat went at half-speed through the thickening air, and it was after eleven o'clock before she felt her way to Circular Quay. Hugh disembarked into a thick fog and groped to the Mosman pontoon. The boat was just leaving; and he learnt, as he got safely on board, that she was the last boat. Other boats that had been sent out earlier had failed to return.

There was a full passenger list—people returning from theatres and picture-shows, fretting about the delay, and anxious over the possibility of accident. The fog was now a thick blanket of opacity. Hugh, with a vague fear of being cooped up below, groped

his way to the upper deck, on which the electrics were thinly burning. He went out to the unlit stern and found a seat in the darkness against a partition.

He had taken off his spectacles. The wet breath of the fog dimmed the lenses; and in a fog, where ordinary vision was of no avail, what use to wear glasses—even magic glasses? So he sat in his corner, blindly staring out into the darkness. The fog laid a limp, damp hand over his mouth and eyes.

Then as the steamer slid slowly into the fog, adding its dolorous whistle to the incessant noise of the other ferries lost on that blank waste of waters, Hugh's acute ears caught a tense whisper behind him. On the other side of the partition, out of his vision, two people were sitting. They were evidently, from their whispers, man and woman. Hugh turned away, but he could not help hearing.

"No!" came an angry whisper from the woman; "I've had enough of you. I don't want ever to speak to you, to see you again. You leave me alone!"

"I can't," whispered the man. "You're so mad-deningly pretty. I forget everything when I'm with you—except you. I'm sorry I've hurt you, Nancy; but you won't leave me like this, will you? You'll make it up?"

"I won't make it up! I'll never make it up!" the

woman vehemently whispered. "You think because I let you take me out like this you can do as you like with me. I'm not that sort, Bill. You don't treat me like a gentleman should treat a lady—and I've always said you were a gentleman. But to-night——"

"I couldn't help it to-night," the other replied contritely. "It's your fault for being so pretty—you with your eyes that burn me, and your lips so red ! But give me another chance, Nancy, and I'll behave myself."

"No," the woman whispered. "I've seen enough of you never to want to see you again. I did think I liked you, because you were different from the others. I like you even now," she weakly confessed.

Hugh had at first thought of moving away, but they would have discovered that he had overheard them. He thought it better just to sit still. They would make up their stupid quarrel, kiss and go off together happily. It would be kinder to them—for in his heart Hugh pitied them adrift on the sea of life in their blank fog. So he sat quiet.

"But it's just because I do like you," the girl whispered, after an interval for her handkerchief, "that—that I couldn't see you again. It's not fair—not fair on me !"

"Ah, you love me!" growled the man, in an animal triumph.



He must have caught her, perhaps kissed her ; for there was a quick struggle, and she cried out tensely, " You brute ! "

Hugh sprang to his feet. Here was a girl in danger ; and for the sake of that one woman he impossibly loved, all women were sacred. But the sound of the man's voice, contrite and humble, showed Hugh he had no need to interfere. That girl could take care of herself.

" I'm sorry, Nancy, really ! Only, I want you that much that I don't know what I'm doing. I'm on fire for you. Your eyes are burning me up."

" Go ! " she whispered, weakly, as it seemed to Hugh, pushing him from her.

The man did not divine the fatal weakness in her voice. " I'll go," he said dully. " But you'll see me again, won't you ? To-morrow night ? I'll come for you."

" No ; I've had enough of you. Oh, why can't you leave me alone ? "

There was almost a tired willingness to yield in that slow whisper. Hugh's muscles tightened.

" I'll never leave you alone, Nancy—never ! " was the sullen reply. " I'll get you, yet. There's not one of your other boys that you like so much as me. I'll have you yet. By God, I will ! "

Hugh sprang up. There was work for him to do.

The girl heard him. " There's someone here—someone listening ! " she whispered.

Hugh paused.

"Oh, I'll leave you without making a row," the man whispered. "And I'll wait for you when this boat gets to the wharf."

Hugh thankfully heard him slink off down the deck. It had come vividly to him that he would have to knock this aggressive Bill down, and from the man's talk Hugh had wondered if he could do it. Yet it was evidently necessary for him to try. He was glad he was not wearing his glasses.

The girl waited a moment to make sure that the man had gone, rose, and, as though dazed, staggered across the deck to a seat on the other side of the deck-house.

Hugh sat down again, glad that the deck-house was between them. He was relieved to find that he would not have to intrude in these lovers' vulgar quarrel. The scene disgusted him in its sordidness. He stared away, out into the fog.

The ferry-boat was slowly feeling its way across that pandemonium of ships' whistles and the continual ringing of anchored vessels' bells. Out there, in the stern, Hugh felt as if he were alone on the bottom of a great black sea, a dead body swayed and swirled by the sluggish currents of the ocean deeps. But not quite alone, for he could not quickly blot out from his mind the presence, unseen behind the deck-house, of the unknown woman. No sound came from her, but her unseen presence opposite,

shut in with himself by that blank wall of mist, seemed to bring her, in her ephemeral sorrow, closer to him, seemed to make her trivial tragedy one with his vague loneliness. It was only a sordid quarrel between a man and a weak girl. True, she had struggled, but the weakness was within her. She seemed adrift, blindly adrift in the fog, clutching vainly at unsubstantiality, a derelict in life, ready to be taken into the first haven that opened to her. The man had evidently some power over her—the power of his fierce love for her prettiness and youth; and she, femininely, had weakened to his masculinity, ready, from sheer weariness at his importunity, to give herself with a sigh of relief into his rough arms. She was a maimed and hardly fluttering bird in cruel claws. Yet she had bravely fluttered, weakly resisted . . . . .

Pshaw! Hugh found himself growing sentimental over what, after all, was a common enough story. That man would be waiting for her to take her home as soon as she stepped ashore. In this fog, what else could she do, tired as she was with her fight, but allow him to accompany her? They would make it up. The girl, swayed by a force stronger than her will, would relent; and they would kiss and be foolishly happy and fulfil their little destiny, unconscious servants to that higher deity, the Race.

Not worth wasting sympathy over such an issue?

Yet Hugh felt sorry for the girl. How that man, with his physical passion, would hurt her shrinking frailty! Hugh stared out over the blind darkness. And, on the other side of the deck, was she, too, staring out at the blank wall of night—she with her trivial little pain, so real to her, and her great, greedy, dangerous yearning after happiness?

Hours seemed to drift by as the steamer nosed its way across the little strip of harbour; but there were so many stoppages, so many false starts and so many turns, that it was by now evident that the boat was lost. Once they grazed the side of another ferry-boat, and once they precipitantly backed from the deep grunt of an ocean liner.

Suddenly Hugh felt through the boat a soft jar, and the thud of the engines swiftly reversed. A grating noise came underneath. Had they run ashore?

He leapt to his feet, and confronted a blurred figure. In her fear the girl had rushed to him.

"What's happened?" she cried. "Are we sinking?"

Above the sudden shouting and the churning of the screws Hugh heard a noise as of a thousand bells chiming in his brain. That voice!

He grabbed his glasses, put them on, and peered into the woman's face.

Through those blessed spectacles he recognised her—the girl in the launch!

She had been the woman whose little love-tragedy he had unwillingly listened to, whose trouble he had pitied and stood aloof from. He had not heard her voice, only her whisper. If only he had kept his glasses on! And she had been in trouble, in need of a protector, and he had waited supinely by!

"You?" he said with a strange hoarseness. "You?"

The girl looked closely at him. "The handkerchief man—Mr. Robjohn!" she gasped. "Then it was you—and you heard. Oh!"

Hugh was quick. "Heard what?" he asked.

"Us . . . me!"

"No," he greatly lied. "Why, there's nobody with you, is there?"

"No," she hysterically laughed. "I mean—you heard that noise. We're sinking!"

Hugh had forgotten everything but her.

"Sinking?" he said; but there was a great gladness in his voice. Oh, to rescue her, alone, to swim ashore with her through the darkness and defy the danger of the sharks! Then he remembered that he could swim only a few strokes. He looked over the side of the steamer. "It's all right," he said. "We must have touched somewhere. We had no way on. But, if anything happens, you're safe—with me. I'll save you."

He had decided that, even if he could not swim very well, it would be a glorious death to die with

her, to go down to the depths or be seized by a shark, deliciously entwined.

"Oh!"

She gave him her grateful look. This was a new kind of handkerchief man. He was not at all the cold person who so gruffly shut her up over the telephone wire.

There was a noise of a rattling chain. "What's that?" she gasped, clutching his arm.

Hugh felt that with that hand grasping his arm he could swim a mile. "It's nothing," he reassured her.

"Quick? Find out! We're sinking!"

"I won't leave you," Hugh absurdly said—the fingers on his arm exquisitely tightened—"now I've found you."

She had no time for his emotions. "But we must know. Do go!"

"I'll go," sighed Hugh. "Only don't move from here. Promise me you won't move."

A soft chuckle from the darkness into which she had quietly retreated was his only answer.

He went swiftly along the deck. At the other end he found a group of passengers gathered near the forward deck-house.

"We've touched a rock, or something—just touched it, and backed away. Not making any water, though; so it's all right," one of the group explained.

"But we don't know where we are," said another. "Captain thinks he's in Mosman Bay; but he's too scared to go on—or back. Rocks all round us. So he's dropped his anchor. We're here for the night, or till the fog lifts—if this fog ever does lift!"

"The captain's getting a boat out," said a third. "He's going to explore a bit."

"I feel sure that we are in Neutral Bay," asserted a stout elderly man, with the conviction that belongs to all stout elderly men.

"And I say we're on the other side of the harbour—somewhere down Vacluse way," said his stout elderly wife.

"Well, we'll know in the morning," cheerfully remarked a youth.

"You mean we'll have to stay here all night?" gasped a girl in evening dress. "Oh, and I ought to have been home two hours ago!"

"Afraid there's nothing to be done," said the young man who was supporting her—and seemed to like it.

"But what shall we do?" she cried, almost hysterical.

"I'm going to sleep," said the stout elderly man.

The young couple looked slowly and long at each other, then, still supporting and being supported, they moved away together to the dark bow of the boat.

"Oh, Mr. Robjohn, I'm so glad you're here," a woman spoke gushingly.

Hugh recognised her. It was Miss Catch of the boarding-house, in her flimsiest evening dress, alone.

"You'll take care of me, won't you?" she cooed.

Hugh shamelessly fled. He had just remembered that the other man, the man called Bill, was on board, and that he had not seen him in the group of passengers. Suppose he had gone back to her?

He found the two standing by the stern deck-house. The man was speaking roughly, impetuously. He did not even hear Hugh's swift approach. But the girl did.

"Mr. Robjohn," she said over the man's shoulder, "I'm so glad you're back. Is it all right?"

"Everything is all right."

He emphasised the fact by stepping to her side.

"Oh," said the man called Bill—Hugh made him out as a big lump of a fellow, loudly dressed, the type that can best be summed up as "flash," and incidentally the type that to an ignorant girl would appear the perfect gentleman—"so you've got another 'mash,' eh? So that's why you turned nasty all of a sudden!"

"This lady," said Hugh, hurt by the sneer, "is a friend of mine."

Here was his chance to succour her. He had never hoped for such bliss.

"A friend?" sneered Bill. "Yes, Nancy's got



plenty of friends. And it doesn't take her long to pick 'em up on ferry-boats!"

"Will you leave her alone—or must I make you?"

Hugh was suddenly cool. He saw that if it came to a fight he would not have the slightest possible chance with a fellow of Bill's physique. Oh, if only Hugh had taken lessons in boxing! Now, when you want to hit a man hard, which fist do you use, and where do you hit him? All his knowledge of economics gave him no hint. Yet he stepped up to him, quite determined to knock him down, trample on him and throw him overboard. With that girl as audience what could he not do?

She moved to him, her eyes brightening. He was going to fight for her—he, this fragile-looking pale man, with his "professor" face and his quiet clothes. And against Bill, with his big build and his great arm! This was a new sort of handkerchief man! And she had thought him indifferent, too engrossed in his work to notice the colour of a woman's eyes. She contrasted the two men. Bill, beautifully dressed, and Mr. Robjohn, distinctly ordinary in attire. Bill had always been her ideal of a gentleman. His striped waistcoat and bright tie, his coloured handkerchief worn in the sleeve, his purple socks and his bulbous-toed American shoes tied with thick laces had appealed to her ignorance as the perfect man. And here was a pale-faced quiet person whom she had regarded

with contempt, piqued only that she, being a woman, had not been able to interest him in her beauty—here was a slight and stooping man about to engage in battle with the might and muscle and method of Bill! Oh, if the handkerchief man only knocked Bill out, how it would clear up everything, and what wouldn't she do for him! And at the prospect of the battle, two men fighting for her, she was thrillingly happy. She strained her slim self to her height, and looked down at the gladiators in the arena. Hugh had not known that she was so tall.

"Will I leave her alone?" growled Bill. "With you? Not much! Why, I bet you don't even know your 'friend's' name!"

Hugh was taken aback. The man saw it.

"Nice intimate sort of friend, aren't you?" he sneered. "Sort of intimate friend you pick up on the boat at night. I know your sort. And you!"—he flung round at the girl—"I know your game! Seen it often enough before! You! I wouldn't be seen with you. I'm straight, I am. And you can go to hell for all I care! Done with me, are you? I'm done with *you*!"

The girl quivered like a rose-petal under the rain. Yet, as Bill turned with a savage laugh, she leant forward with weak and pleading hands.

"Bill," she said softly, "don't say that. I'm straight too. You know I'm straight. Oh, you can't go away hating me like that!"

Hugh had never imagined that a woman would plead to a man so pitifully. She seemed to have flung away all herself, leaving only her sex.

Bill called her a dreadful name and swaggered off. The girl straightened herself, her proud, tense self again.

Hugh caught the brute by the arm. "Take that back," he threatened, "or——"

"Fight *me*?" laughed Bill. "You haven't a chance, you with your glasses and your woman's fist! . . . Fight for her? Not me!"

Hugh, strong with passion, attempted an ineffective blow, which Bill parried with contemptuous ease. Then he swung off down the deck.

Dreadfully humiliated, Hugh drooped, not daring to look at the girl. Save her? He was not capable even of protecting her from insult. He could not even strike one blow for her.

She took two swift steps to him. "He called me that!" she dreadfully shuddered. "Bill, to call me that!"

"The foul-mouthed brute!" Hugh said.

"No, no!" She was stung by his contempt. "Bill's always been good to me—till to-night. But Bill could think of me like that!"

In her shame Hugh felt himself thrust far out of her cognisance. She did not know, quivering with her mortal hurt, that he existed. Overcome with pity, he clumsily took her arm.

"Sit down," he urged, and he led her to a seat. "There's nothing really to worry about."

She flashed a look at him. "You don't believe I'm that?" she asked.

"No, no!" he cried, shocked that she should find it necessary to question him.

She looked long at his spectacles, and was satisfied. Then a low moan came from her, and she put her hands up to her face and cried.

Hugh sat desolately beside her. She cried on, softly. Hugh had never heard a woman cry before, and his helplessness to salve her hurt gave him an utter contempt of himself. The fog was all about them in their loneliness: the two were shut in, with that visible, tangible grief, from all the world. Timidly he put his arm round her to quell those shuddering sobs.

He heard a swift catch in her breath. She glanced up, looked curiously at him, and then sank closer into his arm, while her sobs slowly weakened into silence. She bravely gulped the last one, dabbed her nose with an absurd pocket-handkerchief, felt in her glove, produced a pad of chamois, and deliberately dabbed away the marks of her grief. Then with a wintry smile she said, still comfortable in his encircling arm, "You must think me a silly little fool."

"I think you——" began Hugh impetuously, and stopped.

What the fool did think of her was that she was the most adorable woman in the world. Why, she had actually let him hold her while she cried! What woman could do more?

"I think you—very badly treated," he emended; "and I'm sorry and humiliated that I could not prevent that brute insulting you, or punish him for his coarseness."

"But you tried," she brightened. "You really did try!"

"Lot of use I was against a chap like him," Hugh bitterly admitted.

"Still, you must have known he could kill you, if he liked. Oh, you wouldn't be the first Bill has knocked out—for me; and yet you hit him."

She leaned a little closer.

"But that's all done with now," he said, thrilling with the warmth of that soft, confiding body.

"Yes," she echoed, like a docile child. "That's all done with now." She was tired out. But she sat up, the better to examine this new species of humanity. "Fancy you being that sort of man, after all!"

"What sort?" he said uneasily. He preferred her limp and close.

"Why, I thought you weren't the least bit interested in women."

"I wasn't—till I saw you."

She almost purred. Then, "Whoever would

have guessed you could say a thing like that?"

"Oh," said Hugh desperately, "I could say worse—I mean nicer—things than that!"

"Don't say them yet!" She smiled as she put her little soft hand over his mouth.

For every night for weeks afterwards he miserably wondered why he had not kissed it then.

"Tell me—oh, tell me *everything*!" she commanded.

"Why, what in the world is there to tell except——" He saw her warning glance in time.

"Tell me why you were so nasty to me through the telephone?" she ordered.

Hugh eagerly explained.

"Cats!" She laughed, happy like a child again. "I thought of everything except women. Still, you needn't have minded them hearing, if——"

"I don't mind them—now!" he said. "Why, there's one of them on board now; and I ran away from her—to you!"

She chuckled. "Then it'll be all over the boarding-house to-morrow."

"I don't care," Hugh triumphed.

"Besides, there's nothing for them to get excited about, is there?"

It was an ice-cold drop in his hot heart, like the splash that always comes from the shower in the middle of a hot bath.

"Nothing to get excited about . . . yet!"

she dreamily added, miles away from the present in some delectable, mist-dimmed, impossible future.

He was suddenly warmed again. They seemed in that short half-hour to have got on terms of intimacy that should have taken years to cement. But the night, the fog, the isolation, the scenes through which they had just passed, had broken down conventional obstacles, had smashed through, one after another, the immemorial barriers that palisade the sexes.

"But still," she went on idly, more to hear his protest than to disprove his eagerness, "if you wanted me, you could have looked for me."

"I did," said Hugh savagely.

But he broke off in his hot justification. He could not tell her that he had seen her night after night, and always with a different man. No—not always, for now he recognised Bill as her companion on one of those dreadful evenings. And suddenly the words of that man returned to him, as if shouted in his ear. And another remark damnably knelled in his brain. "Hot stuff!" Charlie had laughingly, easily said. Were those two right, after all? It shook him horribly. He hated himself even for the thought, yet the doubt remained. Could this lovable, weak, beautiful, provocative, exquisitely feminine being be one of the outcasts of the sex, the slag on the age-old furnace of passion?

He had an inspiration. He looked at her through his wonderful glasses. He saw no evil in her.

Nor, considering the circumstances—the appeal of her soft, tear-washed eyes, the melting charm of her pliant, emotion-wearied body, and, shot through it like the strange fire of a black opal, the resurgence of her immortal youth, the undying flame of her loveliness—was it likely he would ?



## CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH, AS FAR AS A WOMAN CAN, SHE TELLS  
HIM ALL

SO, securely and comfortably held by Hugh's happy arm, she looked up at his spectacles, and asked him of the man behind them.

He told her disconnectedly, with intervals during which he was distracted by the absorbing consciousness of the warmth of the body against his arm. It was a poor little history he had to relate. His parents lived in a Melbourne suburb, respectable suburban people, his father a subordinate official in a bank, with the certain prospect, as is the way in banks, of reaching the retiring age limit before he reached the manager's office. Hugh had had ambitions of going to the University, but his parents could not spare the extra money for his fees. As a boy, Hugh passed all his time among books, and even at that stage had the ambition that some day he would become a great author.

The girl looked up rapturously at this.

"You're a writer? Oh, and I never guessed! You write stories?"

"No," he admitted with a drop. "I . . . I mean to be a writer, but not of stories."

She was disappointed. "I love novels," she purred, "especially romantic ones about princesses and American men. But you write poetry?" She was prepared again to admire.

"No—serious books."

"Serious books!"

It *was* disappointing to find that, all by herself, she had not discovered a poet.

"Yes; for a long time I've been writing a book on 'National Economics.'"

"What in the world are they?"

He explained.

"It sounds dreadfully clever," she hopefully conceded. After all, mightn't it be more clever to write that sort of stuff than stories? "How much have you done?" she politely asked, seeing that he regarded the matter as important.

"I thought I had done it all. Only now I see that I was doing it all wrong, so I tore it all up, and I'm beginning it all over again."

This interested her so much that she sat up, and Hugh's arm felt desolate and lonely.

"When did you find that out?" she wanted to know.

"A few weeks ago."

"Before you met me?"

"The same day."

"After you saw me?"

"No, just before."

She was so crushed that Hugh found it necessary to support her with his arm.

"There was a magic in all that day," he madly said. "I did not understand why till that night. *You* were the magic."

She nestled deliciously closer, with a murmur of "The same day!" Being a woman, she could see the significance of apparently incongruous things.

"And now," he went on hurriedly, fearful of what he might do under the temptation of her closeness, "now I am trying to re-write the whole book; but I can't get on with it. The first book simply wrote itself. This one is on strike."

She had her feminine explanation. She found it thrillingly satisfying. She was too selfish to mention it. She hugged it for herself.

"So you're not writing anything now?" she probed.

"No."

"Why don't you try a story—a novel?" she insisted.

"A novel?" Hugh gasped. How on earth did this girl find that out? For he *was* writing a novel.

He had sat one Saturday afternoon with the new draft of his "National Economics" in front of him, flanked by a pile of blank copy-paper, and stared

disconsolately out of the window. He could see the trees on which, that momentous night, the Chinese lanterns had provokingly swung and languished.

It would not do. The thing, even as he had so carefully drafted it, was vague, unconvincing, wrong. He wondered drearily how ever such a subject as National Economics had fascinated him. National Economics, when there was ruddy-brown hair in the world! And, as his eyes reluctantly caught the rough draft, graphs and lists of imports and interest tables stared meaninglessly up at him. They had the look of people who had suddenly gone blind. Or was it he who was blind, dazed by a burning vision? He could not recapture that first fine careless rapture for statistics.

He put down the pen with the new nib in it, pushed the sheets from him, and let his thoughts go back—and how they flew!—to the girl in the launch—also the girl on various ferry-boats, with assorted men.

And then, suddenly, his great idea had come to him. He knew he would never meet her again—that magic would never light the world again. She had forgotten him. This matter-of-fact world was not lit by Chinese lanterns. And yet how vividly he could recall every moment of that magical night! Why couldn't he make that memory live again—for him, vividly and thrillingly for him—on paper?

Why couldn't he write it out, every word of it? And then came the great idea. Why shouldn't he write a novel? What an opening that scene in Mosman Bay would make! What a heroine the girl with the amber eyes! He could do it; he knew he could do it!

He started to write. But after the first page he paused, perplexed.

The scene was all right, the girl was all right; but what about the hero? He to pose as the hero? A sorry hero indeed! And for such an incomparable her what living man could serve? Certainly not himself. He saw at once that he would have to create a hero, a noble, splendid being, not the poor makeshift of a man this ignorant recluse in spectacles knew himself to be. A hero in spectacles? Impossible.

(He forgot that they were magic spectacles. While you wear them you can be anything.)

He deliberately and conscientiously set himself to construct the ideal hero for this ideal heroine. On his long lonely evenings in the ferry-boats he thought him all out. He would be a big broad-shouldered man, immaculate even in tennis flannels, with a brown moustache, a clear-cut chin, laughing blue eyes (unspectacled), and a firm mouth. Splendid in impetuosity, careless of consequences, imperiously thrusting aside every barrier (and these would be many and vast) that held him from the

girl with the amber eyes, he would be a conqueror, her glorious mate. And though to Hugh it sounded like blasphemy that any man should be allowed to hold her in his presumptuous arms, he went to work to build such a paragon. Already he had a clear conception of his superhuman, if chilly, splendour.

Then, in his imagination, he put that hero in his own place on that magical evening. And from that meeting Hugh deduced the most surprising consequences. The author also substituted his hero for himself before that disastrous telephone in the boarding-house. (Only it had to be a big hotel. Heroes don't live in boarding-houses.) And the author rejoiced when his hero flung restraint to the winds and blurted out through the telephone, to the consternation of five matrons who were severally training their daughters to capture him, a reckless proposal of marriage.

That was as far as Hugh had got.

And now his heroine—or rather his hero's heroine—had guessed it! Well, Hugh could not confess it to her. She mightn't like it.

It will be evident from this that Hugh was quite right to abdicate his throne for his hero. His hero would have known better.

"A novel? No; I only wish I could," he miserably said.

"I *would* like to be in a novel!" she sighed.

Then, under her insistent prompting, he went on with his recital of his life. He told her how, disappointed that he could not go to the University, he had entered the Civil Service. It was during his father's temporary transference to Sydney that Hugh had made his choice. So he had got a place, and was fairly well satisfied with it.

"There's not much of a salary," he confessed; "but it'll improve. And I really did not care. For all I wanted was to write my big book."

"And now?" she half smiled.

"Now? It's going to be now—always."

"It looks like it," she admitted, staring over her shoulder into the blank face of the fog,

"Tell me," he demanded quickly, for her cheek was almost brushing his, and he felt mad promptings that dared him to make an utter fool of himself and end it all. He had not forgotten how this girl had treated Bill for attempting to kiss her. "Tell me—tell me all about yourself!"

He felt her form stiffen beneath his arm. Then she easily laughed. "Me? What can you want to know about me?"

"Everything!"

"But you've *got* me here! What else do you want, man?"

She had guessed right. Hugh did not want anything else in the universe. But if he kissed her he would follow Bill down the deck, alone. Hugh's

experience with woman—now I'm divulging a secret—had been pitiable limited. He still retained, for all his thirty-six years, the respect for the idealised feminine animal that persists in shoving her up on a chilly pedestal and keeping her there. And no modern woman looks well on a pedestal. In this age of the hobbled skirt and the pointed shoe she knows her weak point too well. On a pedestal the world can see her crumbled toes. But in a man's arms, looking up at his chin, she knows that he never thinks of her toes.

Hugh gently yet firmly replaced her on her lofty pedestal. She would be quite safe up there.

"Oh, I want to know everything," the rash man demanded.

"Everything? About a woman?" she dreamily murmured.

He refused to acknowledge his repulse. "Why, I don't even know your name."

"Nancy."

"Nancy what?"

"You can call me Nancy. It's rather a pretty, old-fashioned name, don't you think?"

"I will," said this astonishing Hugh, for a moment rashly getting into his hero's clothes. "And now, Nancy, what is your other name?"

"Pinkstone," she sadly sighed. "Nancy Pinkstone."

Hugh did not recall having ever met any Pinkstones.



"Any brothers?" he asked.

She told him that she was an only child. Then, by repeated questions, he dragged out of her these few facts. Her father, an admirable plumber, was dead. She lived with her mother in a back street on the heights of Mosman—a tiny, semi-detached cottage that was really a thin slice of a house, with each room behind the other, held together, as it were, by a narrow "hall." They were, she defiantly confessed, hard up. Since her admirable father's death they had always been hard up.

Hugh looked at the girl's dress. It was, to his eyes, remarkably stylish and pretty; but Hugh knew even a little less than most men of the relative cost of dress material.

"Oh, I make my own," she admitted, noting his glance; "and I'm a great one at bargains."

He complimented her on her costume.

She was, of course, ashamed of its palpable cheapness; but it might look all right to a man. And she was thankful that she had her best things on the outside. Of course, he couldn't know that she sacrificed her underclothes for the outer appearance. Women guessed, but women were cats.

"I'm in a tea-room," she added. "You might as well know. I thought all the men I met knew. And you'd be sure to find out some day."

She flushed and repented as she said it. But this night, alone on that silent, motionless ferry-boat in

the fog, she felt strangely relaxed, almost eager for confidences, ready to blurt out the things she knew she must never tell.

"You never saw me in a tea-room?" she asked.

He asked where she had her place.

She told him. In one of Sydney's leading shops. It had a big refreshment-room on the top floor. They did not serve dinners or suppers, so that she could always get away at six o'clock. That gave her her nights out.

Hugh remembered those nights out.

"It's not hard work, but it's tiring, standing so long. And it comes in a rush. Yes, the customers are very nice to me—at least, the men. The women—well, you know what women are!"

As a matter of fact Hugh did not know. But he was learning, thanks to his spectacles. He inquired further of the men.

"They take me out, of course. The unmarried ones, or the ones that say they are unmarried. But I always find out. You never catch me going out twice with that sort."

"Bill?"

"Yes, Bill's been at my table ever since I've been there. He was always very nice to me—till to-night. You can never really tell till a man kisses you."

"You let them kiss you?"

Hugh felt sick at the picture of her in any arms

but his. It sullied her bloom; it coarsened her.

"Of course." She smiled his ignorance down. "That's what they take me out at night for!"

Her pedestal crumbled. Hugh shuddered from the ruins.

"But a kiss?" he stammered.

To him the thought of kissing this girl, now so close, almost so confidently close, in his arm, seemed desecration. But evidently there were men—or brutes—who did not think so. And also one girl.

"A kiss?" She stared. "There's nothing in a kiss."

"Oh, isn't there?" sighed Hugh, almost inaudibly.

A kiss, compact of happiness, heaven and honey, tinted with delirium and dream, shot through with ecstasy and awe, strange with a sense of sacrilege and shame, tinged with frenzy and a faint half-fear, what was there not in a kiss? You see, Hugh had never kissed anybody but his mother, and he had forgotten what that was like. Besides, a mother's kiss is a frail foundation to build up the conception of that of a lover. Happily, however, Hugh had an imagination.

"Men seem to like it," she hazarded indifferently.

To a girl in whom passion has not yet awakened, a kiss is as tasteless as flat soda-water.

"But you," he blurted out. "Your lips! The profanation!"

“Well, I had to do something to pay them back for taking me out,” she genially apologised.

It had just struck her, from Hugh's horrified expression, that perhaps she had been too free with her favours, or what was really the same thing, too free in admitting the fact. Apparently there were men who looked upon it from a standpoint she had never yet met. Now, a kiss from this handkerchief-man—he had nice masculine lips . . . She idly mused a little on what it would feel like. She determined to find out when the occasion offered. She was even prepared to help the occasion to offer. As there were two sorts of men in this marvellous world she would like to sample both.

But she could not quite get over the shock that her admission had given the handkerchief-man. She determined that she would try not to shock him any more than she could help. She did not want him to lose interest in her. With his quiet ways, his deferential tones, and his excited interest in her, she found him quite delightful—a new species to experiment with. Oh, there were more worlds to explore! And she had thought that she had explored the universe and found nothing but the same rather boring man.

“But why do you go out with these men?” Hugh asked. “Why do you make yourself so cheap?”

This was a new light to Nancy—a disagreeable

light! Cheap? Why, what had she done that all the girls she knew hadn't done—or wanted the chance to do? She knew herself envied by half the girls in the tea-room. She could have as many "boys" as she wanted. Her world was changing colour.

She flamed at the accusation. "Cheap?" she cried. "How dare you say that! I'm straight. And I've kept myself all my life, and my mother. You don't know—men can't know—all I've had to go through!"

Under the spell of her anger at his misconception of her she forgot her prudent resolve of five minutes ago.

"Why, as soon as I left school I had to go to work—work hard, too—at a jam factory, pasting labels on tins—pasting all day, till my working dress was thick with paste, my hair was paste, my lips tasted paste, and I breathed paste. And then at a printing works, making card-board boxes, all day and every day making the same card-board boxes. And then in a workshop at a machine all day, making boy's trousers, only boy's trousers, the same boy's trousers . . . And there were always men—men who made love to you, men who kept on making love to you, till sometimes you almost gave in just from weariness. And then I found out that I was pretty, and that there were easier jobs for pretty girls—better wages and less work, as long as you

were nice-looking. So I tried a sixpenny restaurant, and the manager took me at once, and at the end of the week asked me out to dinner with him. I wouldn't go. I was younger then. So I got the sack. But I'd heard of this place I'm in now, and after waiting a month I was taken on. So I'm all right now. But I've always had to fight for my own hand, and that knocks the foolishness out of a woman. And if I like to go out with men, why shouldn't I? Haven't I earned my right to do as I like? And if I pay them back by letting them kiss me, what harm is there in that? I learnt to look after myself, and I'll do as I like—so there!"

Hugh cowered beneath the storm. He felt a swift dread as the girl tore her wounds open to his view. He felt horribly ashamed at having seen her naked soul. She should not have done that. But behind his dread came the sudden up-welling of a flood of pity for this weak girl at bay in a world of men. And mixed with the pity was a thrill of admiration. This woman, so accessible, so soft, had palisaded and hardened herself against her emotions. She had held her own in a struggle of whose stress he could form only the slightest conception.

He begged her pardon.

With a glad smile she turned her face up to his.

He determinedly blew his nose.

"I wonder," he said, anxiously, "if ever this fog is going to lift?" In order to look at his watch he withdrew his arm from her. It was nearly three o'clock. "I suppose," he added, "we'll be here till daybreak."

Nancy Pinkstone covertly glanced at his anxious face, and her amber eyes drooped. Evidently there were more sorts of men in the world than two. Mr. Robjohn was certainly lacking in initiative. Yet this defeat but piqued her curiosity. She determined to explore further.

In the meantime she felt very tired and sleepy. She sank back in her seat; and after a while, very timorously, Hugh's arm found its way round her. Then her head drooped gently on the soft place between his shoulder and his heart, and Hugh knew by her breathing that she was quietly asleep.

He had never heard anything as beautiful as a woman's soft breathing. And the slow pulse of her breast against his coat, and the rich warmth of her snuggled body against his arm, seemed to him as miracles. So, after a while, lulled by her quietness, Hugh, too, slumbered.

About them was the blank darkness of the pervading fog. Two blind souls, alone in the hushed darkness of life, dreaming of the sunlight of the dawn.

No wonder that in his sleep his two arms held her; no wonder that in her sleep she snuggled closer.



## CHAPTER X

IN WHICH NANCY PINKSTONE ASKS HER MIRROR  
A QUESTION

NEXT morning five pairs of eyes watched Hugh's retreating figure pass the bamboo clump, saw him ascend the steps to the gate, and waited till it swung shut behind him. Then four eager voices said "Well?" and Miss Catch proceeded to tell them all.

She had been telling them all ever since she got home at six o'clock that morning, when she limply staggered in, in her crumpled evening clothes, from her night on the harbour. But right at the most thrilling point Hugh Robjohn came down to breakfast, and the audience turned eagerly, with insidious questions, to the delightful task of "pumping" the chief actor. But he was discreetly monosyllabic, and interested only in bacon and eggs.

Now, having seen him safely off, Miss Catch could take the limelight. She took it deliberately, for she knew that it was the first time, and possibly the only time, in her life that she occupied the

centre of the stage. The only thing that had consoled her that long, disagreeable lonely night on the ferry-boat was the anticipation of the sensation she would cause at the boarding-house. In her life, where nothing exciting except sales happened, she got a lot of interest out of being chorus of life. It is the sole sustenance of many a maiden aunt—which explains why they are usually so thin.

“Well, what do you think?” she took up her wonderful tale. “When I was awakened by the boat’s engines starting again, it was broad daylight. I went out to the end of the ferry to find out where we were—and we had been anchored just round the corner of Musgrave Point. Why, we could have walked home!”

“Yes, but”—Mrs. Fitzherbart was not to be led away by unessentials—“where was our Mr. Hugh?”

“As I was saying,” Miss Catch was not to lose the full flavour of her revelation, “when I looked round, what do you think I saw?”

She gave the pause its dramatic intensity, and deliberately sipped her cold tea. The others were too enthralled even to expostulate.

“As sure as I’m sitting here, I saw Mr. Hugh with a girl in his arms, and both of them fast asleep!”

Each member of her audience moistened her lips, as the lioness does at the sight of her prey. This was indeed a feast!

"Yes, in each other's arms! Our Mr. Hugh had both his arms round her; and she was—well, there is only one word to describe it, much as I dislike saying it—she was *snuggled* up against him!"

Her audience gasped with a fearful joy.

"Our Mr. Hugh!" Mrs. Fitzherbart smiled. "Fancy, our Mr. Hugh!"

"Snuggled!" murmured Miss Flegg, pressing her bony arms across her puny chest.

"But the—the girl, the—creature?" Miss Swatts demanded.

"What was she like?" Miss Littledick asked. "The forward, shameless thing!"

Miss Catch drank in a full draught of delight. "Oh well, I don't like to be unkind, but—well, *you* know!"

They all did.

"*That* sort!" gasped Miss Littledick.

"Quite—and worse!" Miss Catch emended.

"Fair or dark?"

"Worse—red!"

The audience shuddered.

"Red!" sighed Mrs. Fitzherbart reminiscently. "A fair girl is attractive, a dark girl is the devil. But red! It's a rag to a mad bull. It was only the strong love of Mr. Fitzherbart for me—I might, without indelicacy, call it passionate—that saved him, not once, nor twice, from a red-headed creature. He told me so himself. And there was a red-haired

cook we had—and I do hate changing cooks.”

“Yes, as soon as I saw the colour of her hair—almost indecent, I call it,” said Miss Catch, “I knew that nobody, however pretty”—(she meant herself)—“would have the least chance. And it wasn’t just red; it was auburn—you know, the sort of hair any girl who doesn’t respect herself can do for herself.”

“Peroxide,” said Miss Swatts. “I remember.”

But the audience was not interested in Miss Swatts’ memories.

“But the whole girl was red,” added Miss Catch desolately. “When she woke she flamed, eyes and all!”

“And did you wake them?” Miss Flegg asked.

“Asleep in each other’s arms! The poor innocent dears!” tenderly sighed Miss Littledick.

But her remark passed unnoticed, and immediately she was ashamed of it.

“No,” said Miss Catch. “Wake them in that shameless embrace? How could I? It was one of the passengers who saw them as soon as I did. He was a well-dressed man—quite a handsome, well-set-up man. And he looked at them and laughed—horribly, jealously. The picture of her in his arms would really have made any man jealous. And that girl opened her eyes and saw him, and then looked curiously up at our Mr. Hugh, as if not quite remembering. Then it came back to her, and she flung a

look at the other man that made him wince. He went off, smiling uneasily to himself. Then our Mr. Hugh woke up, and looked round him in that dazed way of his. He had taken off those nice spectacles. Then he put them on, and looked at the girl—and the look that came into his eyes then! I've seen my married sister looking like that when she was feeding her first baby."

Every woman looked down on the desolate breakfast-table, and there was, as it were, a gentle sigh suspended in the room.

"I didn't see them again"—Miss Catch wiped her eyes—"till we got off the boat. He was escorting her as if—as if they had just been engaged! And for all I know they are! Anyhow" 'vindictively' "they ought to be!" Her voice had in it almost a wail. "They went off up the road, and I came home."

"At six o'clock," Mrs. Fitzherbart commented, "and Mr. Hugh did not turn up till half-past seven."

All of them drew their dreadful conclusions in silence. Mr. Robjohn, their Mr. Hugh, was lost, eternally lost, lured from his comfortable, happy home by that red rag. The best they hoped for now was his marriage—and even that, they were convinced, would be hurried.

Meantime, at his office, Hugh, tired and sleepy, was going over again the events of that magical

night. The surprise of his awaking beside her—he thought he had dreamed all that; the delight of seeing her again in the dawn, with the sleep hardly out of her misty eyes; the first strange look of those two at each other, like children surprised at a dream come true; the walk to that ever afterwards sacred corner of the street in Mosman, where she had insisted on him leaving her; the long time they had stood there discussing whether he should be allowed to accompany her to her door; and, finally, the promise, the delicious promise, to meet him the following night at eight o'clock at the quay. He had pleaded hard for the evening of the day so beautifully begun; but Nancy, with her superior feminine practicability, had told him that, after the events of that evening, he would be much better in bed. Anyhow, she knew that she would.

But what he most delighted in was the recollection of her on that walk home in the misty morning. She took his arm, for the road was steep and she was very tired, and there was a strange dependence in her weakness that thrilled and exalted him. That *he* should be able to protect such a wonderful being! They had strolled as through the vague streets of some haunted city of sleep, accepting each other without question, as if they had always belonged to each other, wonderfully believing that the world would never wake up. They had been carried away to a new world, and, dazed in their delight, had

spoken but in a murmur, soul, as it wonderfully seemed to him, touching soul.

That, at least, is how this spectacled dreamer remembered it; and thus, he assumed, she too must have felt it. When a man is in love, all the world must melt into his moods. It is sometimes hard on the girl.

At lunch-time he was assailed by a longing to go to the tea-room where she was employed, but a sudden delicacy overcame him. Though every nerve of him ached to be near her again, how could he sit at a public table and let *her* wait on him? The desecration of her dainty hands placing food before him, and she patiently standing, weary, perhaps hungry, while he ate at his ease! The nobility of this thought was, as a matter of fact, rather marred by his assumption that Nancy Pinkstone had dainty hands. Lover-like, he had begun to decorate her with all the attributes consecrated to woman. As a matter of fact, Nancy had very capable hands, firm and well-moulded; but whatever daintiness they had once possessed had gradually been lost in the work that her poverty had given them to do. But Hugh had not even noticed her hands—he had not even seen whether she had any rings on them. To a woman's eye another woman's rings, or the lack of them, is a lure as potent as a one-and-elevenpenny bargain in a shop window. Those rings blaze under the other woman's gloves. And even when a

woman flirts her new engagement ring under a man's nose—and women have been known to do this—he remains blind. It is in the depths of her eyes that a man looks for his information. They tell him more than rings.

And at the thought of those dainty hands placing food before him Hugh suddenly awoke to the suspicion that she might already be engaged—or even married. But he put aside the plain gold band as impossible. But engaged? To one of those men who took her out at night? He said to himself that that was impossible too; but he did not believe what he said to himself. To-morrow night he would look at her hands, and if she had an engagement ring on . . . Now, now on what finger and what hand did an engaged girl wear her ring? Hugh confessed glumly that he did not know. And how in the world was he to find out? He could not ask any of the women at the boarding-house. And how could he ask any male acquaintance? But he consoled himself with the hope that she would not be wearing any rings at all.

He had forgotten that she was a woman. For he had put her safely on her pedestal, and he meant to keep her there. But it is a dangerous thing to lift any human being too far from earth. It hurts more to fall from a height.

The hours dragged on through that day, leaving Hugh still with that uncertainty of the particular



finger and the particular hand on which an engaged girl wore her ring. At last he had a happy thought. He would ask the charwoman. He had seen that lady occasionally when he had been kept late at his office. She never said anything to him, but there was a kind of patient savageness in her attitude as she hovered outside his door waiting for him to vacate his room.

That evening he waited anxiously for her. She was old and bent and dirty, except her hands, which were clean from much immersion in hot soapy water.

He addressed her with a diffident "Good-evening."

She was gloomily surprised, and somewhat suspicious, waiting, bucket in hand, till he let her get on with her work.

"I wanted to ask you a question," he began.

She was at once alertly on the defensive. "I never touches anythink on the desk," she asserted; "I'm honest, I am, as the Government knows as give me the job."

"No, no," said Hugh eagerly, "I'm not making any complaint. I just wanted to ask you a question. What finger does a woman wear an engagement ring on?"

She stared in amaze. "Why, this!"

She held up her gnarled old hand. Hugh saw on the third finger a plain gold band and a gairish

other ring. She turned it reflectively in her gaunt, red fingers.

"I thought everybody knoo that," she said. "It's always put there, because there's a nerve that runs straight from that there finger up to the heart. I never took it off except only onst—and that was to put the wedding-ring on. I've never moved it since—since he put it there."

She relapsed into a grim silence, looking at the ring wonderingly.

"Been there all these blessed years, and him under the ground for the last nineteen."

Through his magical spectacles Hugh saw the abiding romance of that worn ring on the worn hand. So romance lived for ever—even in a charwoman. Through his wonderful spectacles Hugh was always noticing strange things like this. That charwoman was once a pretty girl—like Nancy. Nay, as he peered closer he found a strange, fancied resemblance in her eyes to Nancy's eyes. Her hair was dirty white, and skimpy; but once it might have flamed ruddily like Nancy's. The resemblance grew on him as he looked at this wreck of the womanhood he so strangely revered. That anyone resembling Nancy should come to this!

"Thanks," he said abruptly, fished in his pocket and gave her half-a-crown.

She took it eagerly and instantly forgot her ring.

As he put on his hat she was already on her knees and her old hand was in the bucket.

The following night Nancy met him at the Quay, and, on her suggestion, they took the boat to Watson's Bay. There they wandered up to the Gap, and stood in silence and watched the ocean and the breakers beneath. Hugh was utterly content to wait beside the girl in this thrilling silence that was voluble with daring thoughts. But Nancy seemed restless.

"Can't we sit down somewhere?" she asked.

Hugh looked vaguely around at the expanse of flat rock, and suggested it as a seat.

"No," she said, "we'll find a better seat."

She led the way unhesitatingly to a cosy niche that nestled beneath the edge of the cliff, Hugh helplessly happy when she put her hand on his arm to steady herself. The niche was already occupied by a couple, who did not even notice the intruders. Nancy, without pause, clambered on over a track that Hugh would have shrunk from in daylight. At last she stopped. A kind of shallow cave beneath a ledge of rock invited them. Hugh wondered vaguely at Nancy's knowledge of the cliffs.

So they sat, necessarily close together, and talked, or were long silent, watching the breakers thundering sheer below them and the lights of the steamers passing through the Heads.

And when Nancy Pinkstone got home that night

—her mother had long ago gone to bed—she entered her tiny bedroom in that narrow slice of a semi-detached cottage, and, with all her finery on, walked straight to her mirror.

“Why didn’t he kiss me?” she asked her mirror with a fierce exasperation. “Aren’t I pretty enough? Wasn’t I nice enough? Doesn’t he like me enough?”

She carefully scrutinised the altogether charming figure the mirror showed her, dispassionately intent on finding out the flaw that somewhere must be lurking in her, the flaw that Hugh—the first of all the men who had taken her to Watson’s Bay—had discovered. She honestly could find none—nor, for that matter, could the mirror. She turned away, perplexed and angry, to undress.

And before she slipped her nightdress on she went once more over to the looking-glass, and steadily regarded her naked figure. She turned away after her critical gaze rather more hopeful. The exasperation was still in her eyes, but she was duly comforted by the picture she had seen. She passionately regretted for a mad moment that civilisation had not banished clothes. There was nothing wrong with her figure—nor her skin, nor her face, nor her hair . . . And yet he hadn’t kissed her!

Somewhat reluctantly she slipped on her nightie, and sat on the edge of her bed, considering. Per-

haps she had not given him sufficiently obvious chances? But no, on that point her conscience was clear. Dolefully she counted up the opportunities she had deliberately made. She found that there were at least five times when he could, and should, have kissed her—not counting that scramble through the wire fence, which was hardly an opportunity, though she had never known it to fail before. What *was* there in her that he disliked?

She gave it up, with a sigh for a wasted evening, and crept into bed. She had fully intended to be kissed; indeed she had anticipated quite a lot of miscellaneous kissing. That man looked as if he could.

Nancy had in her young mind but two categories for men—those whose eyes told her they meant to, and those who didn't want to. And she had so looked forward to this evening, more than she had looked forward to any evening, for Hugh was different to Bill and the others, all of whom resembled Bill.

And to-morrow there was the long day in the tea-room, and men would ask to take her out, and well—if he didn't kiss her, there were plenty of others who would. Well, if he didn't like her she would give one of the others a chance. She would let Bill—no, she remembered she had finished with Bill. And, somehow, it was Hugh's lips that, above all others, she wanted to feel on hers. It was ex-

asperating. But she couldn't afford to waste her life. And her evenings out were her life.

The last conclusion she came to before she went miserably to sleep was that she had never been so insulted before in her life.

## CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH HUGH GETS APPENDICITIS AND  
DISCOVERS THAT A BOARDER IS A HUMAN BEING

THE next day Hugh got appendicitis.

The fact that he got this particular disease is sufficient proof, if proof is needed, that Hugh Robjohn acted wisely in not making himself the hero of his own novel. In romantic literature the hero never gets appendicitis. He gets something much more pleasing, though quite as dangerous : he gets the girl.

But the fact was dreadful enough. An operation was insisted upon by the hastily summoned doctor. He suggested that his patient should be at once removed to an expensive private hospital, but for the first time in his boarding-house practice the medical man met opposition to this humane proposal. Mrs. Fitzherbart, supported by a bodyguard of Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, Miss Littledick and Miss Catch, refused to allow their Mr. Hugh to be moved. In the first place, as the doctor himself had admitted, delay might be dangerous ; and their spokeswoman

assured the doctor that their Mr. Hugh would be better cared for in his "home" than in any soulless private hospital.

This astounding fact cannot be accounted for by any of the statistics that we possess of boarding-house hearts. It is patiently recorded here, in the faint hope that it may prove that, though all boarding-houses are the same boarding-house, there is a small but perceptible variation in boarding-house hearts. It must, however, be stated in extenuation that, in the breathless discussion by the ladies that preceded Mrs. Fitzherbart's amazing announcement, one compelling motive might be vaguely suspected. Each of the ladies felt sure that she would be the one detailed to wait on Mr. Hugh; each pictured herself in the attractive starched whiteness of the modern ministering angel; and each was sure that Mr. Hugh would prefer the tender care of herself to the harsh, methodical attendance of a hard-lipped hospital nurse. Nurses, too, even the hard-lipped ones, had been known to marry convalescent patients. Mr. Hugh was susceptible enough, goodness knows, to fast young women who performed in the pantomime; and in his weakened state following an operation he could not be regarded as proof against the most hardened hospital nurse. And if he could not be prevented from falling in love with his nurse, why go outside his home to find one?



It may, after all, have been mere kindness of heart on the part of the four spinsters and the widow ; and in suggesting a mean motive such as this, the historian only brands himself as of a sex from whose consideration the middle-aged of the other sex have bitterly learnt to expect little.

The doctor brusquely assented to Mrs. Fitzherbert's proposal, and, striding to the telephone, rang up for a nurse. The five unqualified nurses looked at each other aghast. Their Mr. Hugh at home, in the charge of an intruder ! And they would mutely have to look on and see her marry him !

So that night, when Hugh should have been kissing Nancy Pinkstone—adequately and carefully prepared to be kissed—at Watson's Bay, Hugh was neatly being disinfected, sliced, and sewn up by two surgeons and a nurse.

In the days following, the doctor came and went, but the nurse stayed. She made the bed-sitting-room into a passable imitation of a bare hospital ward by the simple process of taking up the strip of carpet and sweeping all Hugh's precious books and manuscripts into the back passage. And while Hugh dozed, a tip-toe procession of boarders viewed his pale features and whispered to themselves, "Poor dear !"

Hugh's first thoughts on recovering consciousness were of Nancy. What did she think of him when he did not meet her that night ? Would she

telephone him, or would she, believing him tired of her, maintain silence? He must tell her of his plight, but how? He could not possibly send a message to her, for he could not write, and whom could he entrust with a verbal message? Certainly not any of the boarders, for his secret was too sacred a thing for curious ears. He worried over the problem, and the nurse noticed with consternation that his temperature was not at all satisfactory. But she could not locate the cause.

It really was the wall-paper. One strip of the elaborate floral design had been unevenly joined, and the resulting irregularity worried him exceedingly. To get his mind off it, he laboriously counted up the number of roses in one line of the decoration, painstakingly added up the number of baskets slanting up diagonally to the cornice, painfully estimated the number of ribbons that were on all the four walls, arranged the bright spots made by the roses in cunning geometrical designs, and puzzled over the different colours used in the atrocious scheme. Luckily he was, at this stage, not allowed his spectacles, else he would have made hugh mathematical calculations of the distressing number of dots in the design.

But what made it worse was that he soon discovered the features of a face in a group of flowers that was regularly repeated slanting up to the far corner of the wall. It was a blurred face, but he

recognised it instantly as the face of Nancy Pinkstone. There were hundreds of faces of Nancy, but the face was never quite the same in each repetition. One was laughing, and the next had a puzzled frown; the one beyond was staring at him with hard eyes, and the one close up to the cornice was bitterly weeping. So she stared at him on his sick-bed, bent over him, mocked him, terrified him all those restless delirious days.

But gradually the face changed into another face—that came and went, but came and stayed. And by-and-by, as he recovered strength, he knew that it was the thin face of the nurse. And when his restless eyes turned away from the worrying wall-paper, the cool white of her dress steadied him.

At last the day came when the doctor allowed him his spectacles. The first thing he saw through them was the face of the nurse. He was surprised to find how young she was. He had taken her for granted, labelled as “nurse”; now he saw her merely as woman. (This is always recognised as a dangerous stage in convalescence, especially in heart disease.)

He startled her by asking her how old she was.

“Oh, I’m an old maid,” she smiled; “and you mustn’t ask questions.”

Later she talked. She loved nursing more than anything else in the world. This was her first

general case, though of course she had had full hospital experience. Only, on leaving the hospital she had gone in for midwifery cases. She loved midwifery cases. They were more trouble, of course, but there was always the wee baby—sometimes two. No, she did not care much for children as they grew up. She lost interest in them when they were a month old. It was the helplessness of them that she loved. She had had quite a lot of babies, relinquishing each to its mother with only a little sigh, and gone forth to the mothering of another helpless pink mite.

“I’ve always thought,” said Hugh, “that babies ought to be born about three years old. They’re so funny then. But before——”

“You’ve never had one,” she reprovingly smiled. “Oh, I’d never let them grow more than a month old. I’d keep them at that age always—if I had my way.”

These were the contented, convalescent days, when Hugh was interested in every tiny detail of his little four-walled world. And now he woke to the existence of the other boarders. They seemed to have plenty of time to spare for him. The nurse would only allow one in at a time, and jealously kept watch.

First came Miss Flegg, thin, elaborately dressed, on her parched face the sick-room look that is composed of equal parts of subdued sympathy and

curbed cheerfulness. She had great news to cheer him. The youngest of her four bleak nieces was engaged!

"Of course," she explained, "I knew that young Smith was staying at the same boarding-house with Bertha. But you know what young men in boarding-houses are! Well, one night last week he told her that he was leaving the boarding-house, and the next morning at breakfast Bertha announced her engagement to him! Bertha writes—" Miss Flegg opened one of the letters she held—"that they were sitting on the balcony, everybody else was in the drawing-room listening to the gramophone, and when he said he was going away to another boarding-house she knew at once that he was merely testing her feelings towards him. She could not help showing him—and he kissed her.

"That's her side of the story," Miss Flegg went judiciously on. "But then her eldest sister Blanche writes me"—she referred to exhibit No. 2—"that Bertha confessed that on hearing Mr. Smith's dreadful news she burst into tears. And Blanche says that she found out from the landlady that Mr. Smith was really going the next morning. He had given the landlady notice a week before, and had not said a word about it to anyone. Also he had told the landlady not to mention it. But you know what landladies are, and Blanche suggested

that Bertha knew all about it. Blanche's theory is that the poor youth was simply fleeing for his life, and Bertha knew that he could not go far if she was in his arms. And so she burst into tears, and they're going to be married at Christmas.

"I never gave Bertha credit for so much sense," Miss Flegg mused, "but she can cry on the slightest provocation. But in my days girls did not throw themselves into men's arms; and when a girl does that, there is not much chance for a man, is there?"

Hugh's silence fervently agreed. Nancy had even gone to sleep in his arms, and he knew that he could never forget her. Yet she had apparently forgotten him! She did not care. She had not even rung up to inquire why he had failed to keep his appointment! His first request on recovering consciousness had been to ask if any telephone message had come, and day after day he had made the same vain inquiry. The nurse had offered to ring up any friend for him, but he did not know any address for Nancy except the tea-room. And to commit a message—such an intimate message as he intended to send—to another's lips was sacrilege unthinkable. Still Nancy, who had once been so eager to telephone him, might have sent a message. The thought rankled.

Hugh did not consider Nancy's position. A girl would wait and wait. It was his place to explain.

But would Nancy wait like any other girl? He could not think it.

He was thinking of the old Nancy—the Nancy who had once been called “hot stuff.” It did not enter his mind that there might possibly be a new Nancy.

“Still,” Miss Flegg resumed, after a prolonged perusal of exhibits C and D, “Bertha’s engaged all right; and there are four of them, and they’ve all got Roman noses. So I suppose we must be thankful.”

The next day it was Miss Catch’s turn. (The ladies, after acrimonious discussion, had drawn lots for the order of their entrance.) Miss Catch had put on her pinkest, most be-ribboned blouse. “It will brighten up the poor dear’s room,” she had said.

She was so overcome with the adventure of entering a man’s bedroom when he was in bed that she blushed brighter than her pink ribbons. To cover her confusion she quickly produced one of the novels that she habitually carried. She decided, for her own reputation, to pitch the conversation on a purely literary level.

“I’ve not read it all yet, of course,” she explained; “but it’s by Blank Scrutton; and all Blank Scrutton’s are good, aren’t they? I’ve read them all. The last came out about six months ago, and the girl in it was a *dear*. Her face was

on the cover, and she was in every one of the pictures. But this one"—she picked futilely at the leaves—"isn't quite so good. The pictures aren't half so thrilling as the ones in 'The Girl from Gustavia'; and there isn't a single picture of a proposal here . . . It almost makes you think there isn't a proposal in the book—but of course that's absurd." She sighed, doubtless contrasting literature and life. "Here she is." She showed Hugh the illustration. "I don't care for the way she is dressed. And her hat! She wore such a ducky hat in the last book. And the hero has a moustache now. He doesn't look half—so masterly. It is disappointing when you get to like an author, get to *depend* on him, and he gives you a different sort of hero, isn't it? I think I shall have to give up Blank Scrutton. But if you haven't read 'The Girl from Gustavia' you'll like this. There's one *most* exciting part; it's when he's being introduced to the princess, and the grand duke is listening behind a tree. Of course he does not know she is a princess, and of course she thinks **that** he is a prince. Here it is." She flicked the book open again and let Hugh scan the illustration she had so graphically described. "That's her. Now, *do* you like that hat?"

Hugh did not, and Miss Catch was further encouraged to get Hugh's stern disapproval of moustaches as an adornment of heroes.



"But I'm sure," he hopefully suggested, "that you'll want to read this book yourself."

"Oh no. I'm reading two other novels, and I'm sure I won't finish them both to-night. Besides, I've looked at the last two pages—I always read them over twice the first thing, so as I won't forget—so I won't be worrying over how it ends. No; you keep it, please. It's not the sort of book you usually read, I know; but when one's ill——!"

She would have talked literature for hours, but the nurse interposed. It might excite her patient. Pink was a dangerous colour for invalids. So Miss Catch blushed her way out, and instantly retailed the absorbing conversation to the ladies waiting in the passage.

The next evening Miss Swatts, of the millinery, had her chance. She retailed to him the latest news of the shop, and Hugh was surprised to find how many exciting things did happen in a shop.

Then she taught him "patience," and for half an hour she initiated him into the vagaries of a variety termed "Miss Milligan." She told him that it could be mastered by continual practice. She had made the mistakes he was guilty of when she first, in early youth, took up this fascinating game. She gently encouraged him, repressing her surprise at his palpable blunders. After all, he was only a beginner—and he had all his life before him. She left him her pack of "patience" cards.

At last Miss Littledick's turn came. Her hard eyes in her rectangular face softened as she looked down on his helplessness.

"Don't you want to send any messages to your friends?" she asked at once.

"Has anybody rung me up?" was his eager counter.

Miss Littledick's keen hard eyes saw deeper than he liked. He shrank into his bed-clothes.

"I rang up the office, and told them all about it," she replied, after her long look.

"Did you? That was very thoughtful of you!"

"But I thought there might be some—others—that you would like to ring up. I'd be so glad to send any message for you!"

Hugh was tempted. But Nancy had forgotten him—had, at least, taken no steps to learn if he were alive. Yet when Miss Littledick retired he thought of the kindly intent that lay behind her woman's curiosity. She was sorry for him and wanted to help him.

And when Mrs. Fitzherbart came in her turn with the surprising announcement that, of course, she could not charge him full board and lodging for the month—really, he had eaten so little and was no trouble at all, and then there were all the doctors' and nurses' fees to pay—Hugh glimpsed the humanity that lay behind the boarding-house heart. Through his wonderful glasses he saw the

common bond of friendship that knits this isolated race of ours together. It seemed as if mankind, shut up on its lonely spinning globe, had always deep down, beyond its surface differences, a basic fund of human-kindliness, a broad comradeship for its own kin. Life had taken the masking individualities that we wear, and torn them from our faces, letting us see beneath our disguises the grave smile of tenderness on our brothers' lips. People were, at heart, not different—they were friends, not enemies. In ordinary life the differences leapt to the surface: a crisis let us see beneath our masks the common humanity that remembers and forgives.

Take the most degraded being you know—say a private detective or a literary critic—and you would find some good points in him, some basis on which you two could stand and clasp hands. Even a literary critic has his friends, possibly a wife and seven children who adore him. They do not see his literary criticism—they see a man whom a hard fate has compelled to write it. It is the good mother-kindness of the race, always there, hidden yet deep-rooted, radiating brotherliness.

Appendicitis was necessary before Hugh saw it  
With most of us marriage is the key.

And all the time not a sign from Nancy

## CHAPTER XII

## IN WHICH HUGH IS KISSED

NANCY, however, had more important things to think about than the question whether Hugh was alive. She had appendicitis of the heart—a much more dreadful complaint. She called in a famous surgeon, Common Sense, M.D., who correctly diagnosed her trouble, advised an operation, and deftly removed the appendix of her heart—that little useless sac of the heart where love accumulates and inflames the whole organ.

It was a painful operation, so at first she used anæsthetics. She tried flirting, but it merely irritated the already inflamed heart. She tried to absorb herself in her work, but it is hard to become enthusiastic over ordering lunches, clearing away plates, and washing up. She made herself take an interest in dress; but, as always she had been as keenly interested in dress as she was in men, she felt no appreciable relief.

It was a wearisome operation, too, cutting away

bit by bit that stupid little organ in which were congested all the foolish thoughts and more foolish dreams she had had about Hugh Robjohn. For though each night, in those long waking hours, she thought she had extirpated every trace of the offending organ, in her dreams it grew again; and the next night she had to make a fiercer incision.

For when she had gone that evening to the Quay, and waited and waited, the doubt that had made her fiercely question her mirror the night before recurred and grew to a dreadful certainty. As she trailed off to her boat to return she knew her question was answered. Hugh had not kissed her that night at Watson's Bay because he did not love her—even enough to want to kiss her. And, in her varied experience, that amount of love was not much. And now he had decided not to see her again—he was disappointed, he despised her.

“Yet he might have sent me word—or come and told me he could not take me out to-night,” she thought.

She had not credited Hugh with the meanness of not telling her. None of her other “boys” had ever treated her like that.

Well, she laughed bravely back at the mirror, better begin the operation at once. Delay would be fatal. She even might be tempted to try to see him again. Or he might write and apologise and ask to meet her another night . . . Cut the

offending organ away, and live! So the operation began that night. It lasted all that night—and other nights.

Three weeks later, while the operation was still incomplete, Nancy, idly listening to two clerks talking at the table to which she was attached, heard Hugh's name mentioned. Immediately the old condition of acute inflammation of the appendix of the heart returned.

Quickly she leaned to them. "Excuse me," she lied, "I heard you mention Mr. Robjohn's name. He used always to come to my table for lunch, but for the last few weeks I've missed him. Has he gone away?"

"He's down with appendicitis," the youth replied.

"Oh!" she said, with a swift relief and a sudden comprehension that there need be no more operations. Then calmly: "I'm so sorry to hear that. Only ill! I hope he's getting on all right?"

She was reassured, and breathed deeply. What did it matter, now, that her whole heart was inflamed? She knew the cure.

That very evening she visited Hugh's boarding-house. Luckily the nurse had gone for a stroll to get a breath of fresh air; and, again luckily, it was Miss Littledick who opened the door to her.

To her eager question as to whether she could see Mr. Robjohn, Miss Littledick asked another.

"Whom shall I say? Nurse says he can see visitors now, if they don't excite him and don't stay more than a quarter of an hour."

"Oh . . . just someone . . . he'll know."

Miss Littledick, confronted for the first time in her life with romance, looked at the wonderful girl. Really she was beautiful, with those eager, strange-hued eyes and her brilliant hair. Miss Littledick admitted with a sigh that Mr. Hugh was not to blame.

"I won't tell him who it is," she said breathlessly. "Go straight in. He's . . . he's been expecting you."

"Did he say——?" Nancy eagerly interrupted.

"No," smiled Miss Littledick. "That's why I know," she lucidly explained.

Nancy nodded.

Miss Littledick put her hand on the door of Hugh's bedroom.

"You won't excite him? Promise me. And only fifteen minutes. He's been restless all day; he doesn't seem to pick up. He will now."

Nancy smiled her quick thanks, and passed softly in, leaving Miss Littledick with her hand on her flat chest flat against the wall. She had seen the miraculous passing of romance, and in her foolish, shrivelled, prosaic heart she gave thanks to God, and went straight into the scullery to the filter and drank two cups of water.

Nancy, passing round the head of the bed, saw Hugh—a pale, thin Hugh, incredibly lank and tall beneath the coverlet. But, as she bent over him, he did not recognise her. He had been reading all day, and the nurse, telling him to go to sleep, had sternly confiscated his spectacles and gone out. The doctor had spoken to her about his eyes.

But as Nancy breathed his name Hugh knew it was not the nurse. He looked eagerly up at her—and a cold shiver of disillusion went through him. This was not the Nancy he remembered, the Nancy he had wondered and fretted and dreamed about. She seemed, in her cheap and gaudy dress, which emphasised the challenging lines of her splendid figure, almost—he recoiled from the word—almost common.

True, he did not see her clearly. His glasses were on the mantelpiece.

“Nancy!” he said.

He had called her by her name only once before; but always in his long thoughts of her she had been Nancy; and now the name came inevitably to his lips.

She did not notice it, for in her thoughts of him he had always been Hugh, and she had always pictured him as calling her by her name. Surely those weeks of separation had been long enough for her to get used to his name?

“I did not know that you were ill, Hugh,” she



began. "I thought you had forgotten me. You did not turn up that night——"

"I was taken ill that night, and operated on."

"But how was I to know? So when I went home I thought you disliked me; and no letter or message came, so I was sure. And then I . . . put you out of my life."

(Oh, how swiftly, how recklessly, her secret thoughts had rushed out to him! Why, she had confessed that she loved him. She did not care. She felt that they were both keyed up to the pitch of emotion, when speech takes charge, and heart speaks to heart and understands.)

He was hurt, and showed it. "So easily?" he cried. "I could not."

"I tried and tried," she eagerly confessed, "but I just couldn't. And how did I know? And you've been ill and alone, while I——"

"Not alone," he greyly smiled. "They've all been looking after me."

"The hens?" She was glad to get back, breathless, to earth, with a smile. "That flat thing in the passage? Oh, if I'd only tried to find out! But I was hurt at your not turning up."

"I was hurt at your not ringing me up."

"How could I?" she woefully pleaded.

He saw her more closely now, sitting on the bed. In fact, he saw her with dreadful clearness. She

seemed so actual, so physical—not at all the ideal memory he had of her.

He tried to think back to the night they spent on the ferry-boat in the fog. How defenceless and soft and clinging and dependent and sweet she had been that night! Now he saw her above him, filled with exuberant life, distressingly physical. He looked in vain for the strange eyes that burned in his memories. He saw them, lit by no adoration, but an eager hunger. She looked at him with no reserve. Her gaze seemed to say, "We two are mates. We two are meant for each other"; and her eyes seemed to compel him to look at her. In that sick-room her crude vitality was disturbing.

Hugh forgot that his weakness, his helpless posture in bed, made her seem the stronger. He forgot, too, that he had not his magic glasses on.

"How could you?" he echoed, with the irritability of the sick man. "I suppose there were plenty of men you could go out with?"

It was all wrong. Hugh had been dreaming of this possible meeting, and had rehearsed the words he would say. And now, by some perverse madness in him he found himself hurting her. It was all wrong; but the right words—the right thoughts—would not come.

She was hurt, horribly hurt. For she knew how

she had put off several luncheon customers that had insisted on taking her out on evening ferry trips. And she was proudly conscious how hard it had been for her to refuse.

"I never went with nobody since that night," she said shortly.

He was grudgingly mollified, but her ungrammatical speech struck him an unexpected blow. To his student-ears a vulgarism in speech was worse than a crime. He had never noticed her speech before: he had been too much in love—or perhaps the magic spectacles affected his hearing too. Remember, he was ill and fretful. He was in that state of exhaustion when the physical tide in him had ebbed to its lowest. Desire had gone from him, and, sad though it is to contemplate, when desire ebbs, love, its moon, has gone too. We are animals all—and it is not wise to intrude on a sick animal. Hugh was a child to be petted, not to be argued with.

Nancy did not know. She had never before had to do with a sick man. The men she went out with were always overflowing with vitality. She thought, from her narrowed experience, that all men were.

"But you might have telephoned?" he muttered peevishly.

(Hugh was, as you will have seen, no hero—only a sick man, with a sick man's grievance against

health, lost in a world of blurs and shadows without his spectacles.)

"I was too proud," Nancy cried. "Hugh, a girl—a girl like I am must have some pride."

Again Hugh's sensitive ear caught that slightly ungrammatical phrase. She *was* common, and he had never noticed it! And suddenly everything about her became cheap and common—her dress, the rich curves of her breast as she bent over him, her eyes, bold in their knowledge of men, her lips, too lavish of kisses.

She saw the dreadful look in his eyes. She did not know how she had offended. But to stay that sickness in her heart, to make sure, at least, of one thing in a toppling world, she bent over him and kissed his lips.

The man, prone on his bed, was stung by that kiss. It was so greedy, so close. He had never before been kissed by a woman—except his mother, and this kiss was not like hers. It was a revelation of passion such as he had not dreamed. His delicate virgin soul shrank from that rude contact with life.

"Hot stuff!" The phrase leapt into his memory. She was fast, vulgar, common. What had he seen in her? Oh, fool that he was, not to have taken warning! She was of that other class of women—the women he could not mention. He saw back, fatally clear—all the signs, obvious enough now,

but always so foolishly ignored and so strenuously argued down—the signs that placed her in that class apart. And he had almost fallen in love with her! It seemed incredible.

He had built up a woman in his own image—a thing that is fatal even for a god—and she had fallen, fallen! That dream-woman, delicate, reserved, sensitive—his dream-mate—had leapt boldly from his dream, and clearly, in the light of that room, had shown herself bereft of all the attributes he had draped round her—a mere thing of flesh and blood.

(This is a miracle that occurs to all men at the age of thirty, but usually we admiringly say, “*What flesh and blood!*”)

But Hugh was in a state akin to that of the vegetarian. He abhorred the sight of flesh and blood. That kiss, to his vegetarian soul, was a needless profanation.

She saw his shudder. She froze. He did not love her. He had never loved her.

“Good-bye!” she said, choking, and blindly felt for the door.

There might or might not have been a flat thing against the wall of the passage. She found herself outside in the night, chilled, inert, slain. A long while afterwards she discovered that she was in her bedroom, dry-eyed, on the bed in the darkness.

“What’s the use of trying?” she fiercely asked the blackness. “What’s the d——d use?”

There was infinite comfort to her soul in the swear.

## CHAPTER XIII

## IN WHICH HUGH PROPOSES

**A**FTER that devastating kiss Hugh's recovery was rapid. In a few weeks he was once more at the office, cured.

More than his appendix had been removed from him, and there was a bleakness in the new world of health to which he had been restored. His glasses showed him a wonderful world; but it was a world under moonlight, unhuman, a landscape drained of vivid colours.

Yet it was a good world—a world to work in. He turned eagerly to his novel, but found that he had lost his heroine. His hero was still beautifully heroic, but his heroine stood tarnished. He turned back to the first glowing chapters, and smiled sadly over his impossible idealism of the sex. Yet from this mood, with the artist awaking in him, he recovered. After all, he had been right. Women, in the bulk, were divine. The mistake he had made was in assuming that Nancy Pinkstone was truly representative of the sex. She was one of the other sort—not spoken of.

So in the new chapters of his novel he recanted nothing. Just as in the case of his hero Hugh had had to take himself out of the part, and get it played by his ideal of the heroic, so now he took from Nancy the robes he had so gracefully draped her in, and decorated a more tractable figure—his ideal of womankind. If Nancy had failed to live up to the qualities with which he had graciously endowed her, it was the fault of Nancy, not of the sex. He had chosen the wrong actress for the part—that was all. The only thing to be done was to go on writing. Nancy's appearance was perfect for the sentiments with which he had endowed her. The sex would have to make-up as nearly like her as possible. Hugh could trust himself to look after the excellencies he had discovered in woman. He consoled himself that he could not have invented so fitting a model as Nancy Pinkstone.

Yet it hurt him, in his human moods, when the zeal of the artistic creator warned, that with all her splendour, her magnetism, her charm, Nancy should have a mind that was common, a heart that knew not the refinement of restraint, a mouth that greedily profaned the sacredness of love. Well, she was the exception. He went on building up his first ideal of her in his novel, making her ever more and more unsubstantial, thrice crowning her with the vague impossibilities of his ideals.

At the office he laboured hard to catch up his



accumulated arrears of work. He never went ferry excursions at night. His glasses still showed him a world full of enticing vistas of wonder; but, curiously, he had no wish for exploration. He was cured.

He remained cured for over two months. Then, one evening, he found himself pocketing the handkerchief that Nancy had sent him back, neatly ironed, the day after his meeting with her. He hastily put it back in the drawer. That night he could not work at his novel, nor, when he went to bed, could he sleep. In the darkness of his room he found himself going over again the strange wonder of that first meeting, and all the weeks of unrest and adventure that had followed. Those memories hurt him, but not so much as he expected. In fact, after a little while he grew to like the sharp sting of the remembrance.

Then, suddenly, the question started up in his brain. What if he had been mistaken? What if he, a sick man, had merely imagined the coarseness of her? The question was torturing. Compared to its pain, the sting of those other memories was balm.

When the dawn came in he found the solution. He, unseen by her, must see her again. The sight of her would settle that foolish dread. He would be cured—or know himself for a fool, and worse. He insanely hoped that he would be proved a fool.

With this satisfying decision taken he went straight to sleep.

Next day Hugh went to lunch at the tea-room sacred to Nancy. He had been to tea-rooms before, of course; but in those days when he had not come to spectacles tea-rooms had seemed to him crowded, distasteful places filled with haughty Harrison Fisher waitresses who exchanged icy repartee with weary youths. Now, for the first time, he really saw a tea-room.

The vast, garishly decorated place was studded with little tables, like mushrooms, and filled with huge gesticulating hats, and the thin, tepidly intoxicating odour of hot tea.

The room was filled with the incessant treble of women's voices, shrilling like locusts on a mid-summer day. Beneath this high stridency of sound mutually adoring couples at corner tables ventured on intimate confidences, as isolated as if on a raft at sea. White-robed priestesses wearily ministered to the devotees of the solemn rite of eating.

It was this gregarious century of ours—women flocking to women, leaving their mediæval kitchens with their mediæval handmaids in the moated inaccessibility of the suburbs, and crowding like butterflies into the light, the chatter, the glitter, and the haste of the modern eating-place.

Yet these modern women were as mediæval as

their kitchens. Each craved to be up to date ; and each was, in this tea-room, as out of date as a knight in his armour. Each came to eat armoured against the act of eating. Each ate only under the most wilful disabilities. Each had deliberately made eating a task. Before she could satisfy her craving for tea and cakes, she had to draw up a clumsily fixed portcullis of a veil. It had to be untwisted and poked away in order to free her mouth. Then she had to unbutton and draw off her gauntlets. This was a laborious process, as the tighter and hotter her gloves were the better she liked them. But when she wore elbow-gloves she usually gave up the task in dismay, and awkwardly prodded cream-cakes or raised her cup with tucked-in balls of swede bulging at her wrists. Then, having chattered and eaten, the whole laborious process had to be gone through again. It seemed to Hugh that to human beings thus palisaded it was scarcely worth while to eat.

With those curious spectacles of his Hugh saw it all ; but, to his immediate relief, he did not see Nancy. He warily slid to a seat at a side-table that was happily unoccupied by hats. Opposite him a solitary old gentleman was unctuously champing baked beans, and two waitresses chattered softly against the wall. Hugh began on the comprehensive menu.

A waitress, coming with a loaded tray, steered

her way through the hats to a table adjacent. Hugh looked up and saw Nancy.

She did not notice him, but proceeded to unload her tray at a table occupied by four young men. One of them Hugh recognised. It was the individual whom Hugh had met on the ferry-boat—that Bill whom Nancy had informed him she never wanted to see again.

She was seeing him again, judging from her smile at him and the intimacy in Bill's look. The other men had a quick interchange of smiling repartee with her—evidently they were old customers and knew her well. But in Bill's low words with her, in her heightened colour as he spoke to her, in her nervous eagerness as she bent above him; in all this Hugh saw that she and Bill were emphatically friends again. Friends? Lovers, The thought was torture.

Suddenly she saw him, and stiffened. Then, without recognition, she bent again over Bill; and in her demeanour she seemed to Hugh to emphasise her absorption in that sleek, brilliantly dressed young man. Then reluctantly she left him and came to take Hugh's order.

Hugh was frozen by her stiff aloofness. He tried to say something, but only muttered, "Cold beef, please!" He was conscious that the whole room—the whole array of hats—was intently listening.

The waitress went obediently off to get his food.

And Hugh risked indigestion by the hurry in which he ate that beef. He did not look again at that other hateful table, but he heard her laughing and chattering with the men. It was hateful. She to wait on them, to condescend to them, to enjoy their company! He paid for his meal and got outside where he could breathe.

She had done with him—did not want to speak to him again. And the memory of her—wonderful even in her bleak white uniform, with her brilliant eyes—hardened for him, and her too pallid face made the thought exceedingly bitter. For this Nancy the waitress was even a more beautiful Nancy than the one of his memories. (Perhaps it was her uniform, which allowed her no chance to indulge in her rather common taste—certainly she had a refinement that he had not noticed in all that collection of gairish hats.)

There was a new look in her face too. It seemed to Hugh that since he had last seen her she had strengthened in character: she seemed a woman, no longer a girl. Amid all that chatter and glamour she had a poise; she was sure of herself. There was a disconcerting charity in her blank gaze at him; and even her figure, always so full of youth, seemed to radiate vitality.

And this was the girl that—oh, fool, in his blindness!—he had judged common! Why, she was regal! In all that room there was no woman

worthy to wait on her, and he degraded her and himself by allowing her to serve him while he sat and ate.

And then there was Bill. From her tone to him that wonderful night on the ferry-boat, Hugh had thought that she could never bear to speak to Bill again. And here they were—friends, lovers again ! It made him bitter. How could she ? Women ! False, unstable, with their weather-cock minds ! How ever so long had mankind put up with them, revered them, adored them !

Hugh, at least, was done with the sex. And yet . . . .

It had been a mere selfish craving to see her again, to tell her he was sorry, that had brought him to the tea-room. He left with a conviction that his life would mean nothing to him unless he won her for his wife. And she had passed him by suddenly, in some mysterious way no longer needing him. She was done with him as one of the trivial incidents of the past. And she was in love with Bill !

Her blank scorn of him was the spur that Hugh needed. He made up his mind.

That afternoon he left his office late, and, instead of going home for dinner to his boarding-house, he made his way to the tea-shop, and watched the door from the pavement outside. She came out at last, trimly dressed, one of a stream of girls hurrying

home. As he stepped eagerly forward she saw him. She glanced back at the girls she had just left, hesitatingly. But he gave her no chance.

"I'm going to see you to the boat, Nancy," he said.

"I prefer to go by myself."

"I won't let you."

"I'll call a policeman to protect me," she flung at him.

"Call one."

"There's none about," she admitted, apparently not seeing one who stood pyramidically at the corner. They walked in silence, level.

They were in the stream of girls that flows every evening swiftly to the quay, swept along in the torrent that trickles here and there off into trams, but as it nears the quay gathers into a swift river. It was as if a sleeping city had been magically awakened, and out of its ruins radiant youth had tumultuously rushed into the open air. Trams swung past them—like planets, each glowing and lit, populated with stranger races. A brilliant butcher's shop flung its radiance across them as they walked. It remained ever afterwards to Hugh as a decoration in yellow and red, the ranged carcasses making a quaint decorative pattern behind the busy, white-robed butchers.

"If you don't approve of me," she at last broke the unbearable silence, "why do you want to meet me again?"

"Nancy, forgive me. I was ill. I was horrible to you; but now——"

"You're better now?" she asked without interest.

"Yes. I see clear now. And I must see you again."

"Begin again?" She froze him with her bitter sneer. "Begin again—till you're tired of me again?"

"I shall never be tired of you," he broke out hotly, careless of the throng about them. "Nancy, I see now. I know—I've always known—I love you."

There, on the crowded pavement, his anguish had made him speak. He had conceived some silent place, some dim arbour, some moonlit cove, some quiet balcony, for so momentous a declaration. But life is so seldom like the novels.

She flung round at him with a flashing bitterness in her eyes.

"Love? Oh, I know you. You say it now—to get me to meet you again. But you've shown me what you are—what you think of me. You're a gentleman; and I'm—common."

She said it with a pride that thrilled him.

"Yes, I am. I know I am. I'm not good enough for you—except to take out on the harbour at night. But you don't know——"

"I do," he protested.

"You don't know how I tried. Till I met you I thought I was good enough for any man; and then, there was something about you, something in you,



that made me see I wasn't. And then—I liked you then—I tried to make myself different. You didn't like my ways. I tried to alter them—just for you and your opinion of me. I tried to be like what you thought I was, and you didn't notice it."

Hugh felt sick. She, this wonderful girl, to believe herself below him! How he must have hurt her! What a priggish fool he had been!

He started to explain, and found that they were already at the quay, amid that wild scramble of figures dodging trams, racing for their boats.

"Come and have dinner with me at a restaurant," he implored. "You must hear me. You must hear what I have to say. We can't talk here."

"No," she said. "I must go home."

"Meet me after dinner and we'll go to Watson's Bay."

"Watson's?" She shuddered. "With you again? I couldn't."

"Why?" he foolishly asked.

She faced him defiantly on the pontoon. "Because I'm going to Watson's Bay to-night—with another man. He's my sort—common."

He let her go into the ladies' cabin, and smoked a quick pipe on the upper deck, and burned his tongue.

Had Hugh seen Nancy as she hurried home from the boat he would have had more appetite for his dinner. For all her bitterness had evaporated, and

in her heart she felt the tugging of an old illogical hope. She had put Hugh out of her life—and now he came back. He had said that he was in love with her still. She laughed softly. In love with *her* ! And she—no, she could not bear to think of it. She had made that for ever impossible.

The dreadful mocking thing was that he had chosen to come back just at this moment. Had he only met her a month or so before . . . He was to blame, she said to herself bitterly. He had cast her out, and she had gone back—back to her own sort. She laughed as she looked back on the futile efforts she had made to improve herself, to reach that dim ideal that Hugh carried about with him.

Well, he was too late. That was all. She was going to see Bill that night again, as she had seen Bill for many nights the past month.

But as, after her meal with her mother—a meal marked by her mother's eager questionings and Nancy's taciturnity—she was walking to the wharf, the old mood revived. If only it had been Hugh, not Bill. Yet, she said to herself, she would get on all right with Bill. She would make him a good wife. And Bill would marry her ; she was sure of Bill. She had known girls who had given in to a man before marriage, and had made them good wives afterwards. For Bill, in his fierce, reckless, domineering way, loved her ; and on that first night, smarting with Hugh's scorn of her, she had been

reckless too. What did it matter? If she couldn't have the man she wanted, she would take the man who wanted her. And the physical side of her, undisciplined, tremendous in its power over her, had conquered her. It was not Bill's insistence—she was fair enough to admit that—though Bill *was* insistent. She could have resisted him; she did try to resist him at first, but the other side of her nature had at last gained the mastery, and she had given herself to him.

Afterwards there had been the moral horror of herself, her fierce quarrel with Bill—and then the making-up, the meeting with him night after night. Oh, it was all horrible, and yet it was balm to her injured pride, her wounded self, that there was a man who loved her so much. In some strange, perverted way Bill's love rehabilitated her lost pride. Hugh had cast her off: he must have known that she would go back to Bill. And Bill and she would be married in a month, and all her agonies and exultations would be smoothed away by the triumphant fact of her marriage.

But if only it had been Hugh! Now that it was too late she had a stinging regret that he had to be put out of her life. Ah, how she could love Hugh! And she was going to marry Bill . . . . .

It was just here, as she started to walk again, that Hugh Robjohn came from the darkness to her side and spoke to her. She turned to him with a

gladness that she could not repress. He had come into her life again at the last minute. And he would come again—after she married Bill. For she loved him, loved his impossible ideals, his deference to her, his straightness, his gentleness—all the qualities that seemed so far off from her.

She was tired of fighting herself. She would put Bill off for one night. One night would not matter, and she would always have it to look back upon when she was Bill's wife. One evening with Hugh—she was sure that he would kiss her and calm her dangerous unrest.

So when Hugh, desperate, yet thrilled by the meekness of her mood, suggested that he should take her out in a rowing-boat, she acquiesced. It committed her to nothing, and she could easily invent some excuse for Bill on the morrow.

Of course, nobody but Hugh Robjohn would have thought of a rowing-boat as a suitable, or even possible, place for a proposal. Skiffs are not built to carry a cargo of emotion.

Hugh handed the girl carefully into the boat, and slowly made his way down the moonlit bay. His course was less erratic than would have been expected, for Nancy had the steering lines. Little was spoken, for Hugh found conversation incompatible with sculling, and she was inwardly wondering, already with a quiet smile on her lips, at the perplexity of Bill, waiting at Circular Quay.

It was in a little cove surrounded by the bush that Hugh at last stopped rowing. Then, without preface, blunderingly he proposed.

She stared past him.

"I—I wanted you to say that," she said at last. "It was mean of me; but I wanted to hear you say it. When you said it in the street I was too bitter to pay any attention. It was wrong of me, but I wanted to hear you say it as if you meant it. Not that it matters much now."

"You won't marry me?" he piteously asked.

"To *marry* me?" she said, startled.

He let the useless sculls lie, and scrambled to the seat beside her. Only the Providence that waits on lovers preserved the equilibrium of the frail little skiff. Nancy felt herself gathered into strong, reckless arms and hotly kissed. She also felt the rasp of his spectacles on her nose.

The glasses fell into her lap. He did not notice their absence. She held the glittering things up.

"Your spectacles!" she laughed hysterically. "You've dropped your spectacles. They nearly bruised my nose—and there's so little of it to bruise. I'm sure they've scraped the powder off. You ought to be more careful. Are you always so rough? I've a good mind not to give them back to you."

She was gaining time to recover from the madness of that embrace. She must prevent him

kissing her again. It was altogether too unsettling for a heart so treacherous as hers.

"My spectacles? What do I care for them? They're only in the way." Then, as she held them tauntingly before him, "Throw them overboard!"

For a moment she held them over the side of the boat, with a mock "dare" in her smile. He did not clutch at them.

Then she handed the precious things carefully back . . . and this history, almost wrecked, can go on. Had she thrown those wonderful glasses into the harbour this history would have stopped here, and the body of Hugh Robjohn would have been recovered some days later from the harbour, drowned in a vain attempt to find again his magic world.

"Put them on," she gaily commanded. "I like you in them. And you'll have to be more careful when you've got them on."

Adjusting them deftly on his incomparable nose, he eagerly leant forward.

"But you—you're adorable! Oh, don't keep me waiting. I want you. You must marry me."

She pushed him weakly away, but only the sudden slopping over of a saucerful of water into the skiff saved her.

"You'll drown me," she cried. Then, with a sudden seriousness, "I almost wish you would."

"You can't love me, Nancy?" he pleaded.

"Love!" She looked at him seriously. "Hugh, I did love you—ever since that night on the ferry in the fog. Who wouldn't? But when I saw that I disappointed you . . . Oh, what's the use? I can't marry you."

"Can't!"

"No," she replied to the anxiety in his gaze. "I'm not married, or in love with anybody else—at least, not so much in love as I've been with you; but marriage . . . ?"

She looked at him with clear, wise eyes, straightly, without flinching.

"I'm not the marrying sort, Hugh; but oh——" And quickly her arms were about him, her flushed face upturned to his, like a thirsty flower, glad of the rain. "Oh, what do I care? I love you, Hugh. Love *me*!"

He did not see her meaning. To Hugh, in his high mood, such a meaning would be inconceivable. He did not even guess what she offered, but the fool caught on the one word "love," and went to his doom clutching his straw.

"You love me, Nancy? Then that's all I want. You'll marry me?"

She drew back, amazed at his blindness. Even through those spectacles of his he must have read the meaning in her eyes.

"I told you I could not marry you," she said.

"You don't like me? There's something about me," he began. "I'm not good enough, I know, but——"

"Not good enough?" She had to laugh, else she would have cried. "Hugh, it's me that ain't good enough—for you."

Gazing at her in his perplexity through those glasses of his, he did not notice her grammar. Love is rarely strictly grammatical.

"If that's all," he showed his relief, "we are going to be married to-morrow."

"Hugh, listen to me," she protested. "It's like you to want to marry me after . . . But I can't let you do it. It's not fair."

Doubtfully he put his hand to his brow, and unconsciously brushed his spectacles sideways. Taking them off to readjust them he looked at her.

"Not fair?" he echoed in growing wonder. "You mean——?"

A slow horror sidled into his brain; a cold doubt struck its steel wedge into his heart. He shivered.

She saw the grey look in his eyes. She could not stand it. Impulsively she reached across, took the glasses from his paralysed hand, and, to shield her from his dreadful gaze, placed them in their accustomed red line on his nose.

Through them he looked at her again, and as he looked the grey doubt vanished. He wondered



how ever it had entered his head. His glasses showed him only her. He leant to her and kissed her.

She took it for his answer, absolving her, forgiving her, admitting her, repentant and purified, again to the holy place.

So he knew—and yet would take her.

The sudden surging up in the heart of all that that forgiveness meant overwhelmed her, swept her from her refuge, and cast her into his absolving arms. His sacrifice made him only the more wonderful. It was like Hugh: his great forgiveness could purify even her. Her love blossomed in her embrace.

Perhaps her lips—thus sanctified—were as pure as the cold, moist mouth of a child.

## CHAPTER XIV

## IN WHICH HUGH IS MARRIED

THE next morning did not promise the sun that should shine on a bride. It was not the usual brilliant Australian winter morning, sparkling like a shower of confetti; it ominously suggested umbrellas and goloshes.

Yet what did it matter to the bride? She was going to be married to Hugh.

At breakfast she briefly mentioned the fact to her mother.

"I'm *that* happy!" Mrs. Pinkstone rapturously exclaimed. And with a wheeze, gathering her rotund body from her chair, she waddled round the table and did a remarkable thing. She kissed her child.

Nancy impatiently put up with the kiss.

"I knoo you'd fix it up with Bill," Mrs. Pinkstone murmured, panting with her emotion. "He's a good sort, is Bill, from what you've told me."

"It's not Bill," Nancy precisely enunciated. "It's someone else."

Mrs. Pinkstone, heaving into her chair, was, as she expressed it, flabbergasted.

"Not Bill? Then—not that swell gent as I ironed the hangkersher for?"

(Poor Hugh! That treasured handkerchief that had given him such tender thoughts because Nancy's hands had lovingly ironed and folded it! Yet it must be confessed that Mrs. Pinkstone had done it much more deftly than her daughter would have.)

"Yes, I'm going to marry Mr. Hugh Robjohn," said Nancy, with the importance of the newly engaged.

"He's a real gent, from what you told me," said her mother. "Not that me own daughter ever did tell me much about her friends," she added, "or brought 'em to meet her old mother. Not that I'm blaming you, Nance. I knoo that I could always trust me own daughter—though I do say you've been carrying on with that there Bill. I thought it was getting that way that he'd *have* to marry you. But you marrying a real swell! He's got a position in the Government, hasn't he? That's a steady job—not like my poor husband's. What's his wages?"

"I never asked him."

"As if you'd have to arst him!" Mrs. Pinkstone raised impotent eyes to the gaudy frieze. She was frankly surprised. Her own daughter, too! Well, well. "I thought any girl with her wits about her

would have found that out first thing—any girl of mine, anyway.”

“I’m in love with him,” said Nancy.

“But you was in love with Bill.”

Nancy had the woman’s reason—all-sufficient.  
“That’s different!”

And indeed it was different. A sleepless night, after a long farewell over the front gate, with reiterated instructions about the time and place of meeting next afternoon, had shown her how different. Would Bill have forgiven her and taken her if she had made a similar confession to him about Hugh? She knew Bill. Hugh, by that one act, had soared into regions where her woman’s heart could only reverently adore. Nancy looked back at Bill with a shudder of relief. And she would have married him but for that chance meeting with Hugh.

“Married to-day?” Mrs. Pinkstone mused, for the other extraordinary part of her daughter’s announcement had now sunk into her consciousness.  
“What church?”

“At a registry office,” said Nancy airily.

“Oh!” Mrs. Pinkstone was overwhelmingly disappointed. No “Mother of the Bride” in the Sunday paper, no day of tearful pride that every mother of a girl is surely entitled to demand. “I would have liked a proper wedding. I was married properly meself. You’d look so nice in white, Nance—and I’ve got my jet brooch and my black.”

"Don't talk nonsense, mother. We couldn't afford a wedding."

"It seems to me that you're not really married at a registry office. Doesn't look respectable like. I'm sure I would never have felt married if it hadn't been in a church, even though your father couldn't afford the 'Wedding March.' Still, we had bags and bags of rice." The thought of that homely cereal seemed to comfort Mrs. Pinkstone, but not for long. "*I wouldn't think I was really married at a registry office.*"

"I'll be married this afternoon all right."

Mrs. Pinkstone shot a suspicious look at her daughter. Then she whispered—

"What's the hurry for, Nance? You're all right, I suppose?"

Nancy flushed with quick anger. "Of course," she cried. "Mother, to say such a thing. . . .!"

"Oh, well," Mrs. Pinkstone murmured conciliatorily. "Only you was in such a hurry . . . But not you, Nance; you can take care of yourself, even though you are out so late and never tell your mother where you've been."

Mrs. Pinkstone was satisfied. There was no consciousness of shame in her girl's tone.

Nancy, accepting the proffered apology, graciously explained that Hugh insisted on her marrying him right off.

"He's that jealous of Bill; and unless he marries me he thinks he'll lose me."

Mrs. Pinkstone thereupon declared her intention of attending, in the black with the jet brooch, the ceremony at the registry office. Nancy demurred. The bridegroom mightn't like it. And when Nancy demurred her mother always found it expedient not to press the point.

"Well, you'll have to show me the certificate—I suppose they give you a certificate at a registry office?"

Nancy did not know, but promised to inquire about the document, and, if possible, produce it.

During the morning—it was raining without subterfuge now—Nancy went into the city and called at the tea-rooms. Interrupting the manageress's reprimand for her unpunctuality, Nancy informed that astonished woman that, as she was getting married that afternoon, she had no further use for her uniform. She also added that she did not want her old "wages." She was not coming to the tea-room any more—except to be waited upon, like the lady she now was.

In the afternoon she went to meet Hugh outside the registry office. The rain showed no sign of abating. It was pouring down with a quiet, hopeless persistence that damped her optimistic mood. Her mother's absurd suspicions returned to her. If she hadn't been "all right" would Hugh have married

her? High as was the nobility of character with which she had now endowed this rather ordinary man in glasses, Nancy did not think that Hugh could do such a thing. But, with an uneasy laugh, she put the thought out of her mind. Any girl who knew her way about need not worry about consequences. Nancy flattered herself that she was one of that sort. And so, with a resurgence of her optimism and a growing excitement, she hurried along the muddy pavement to be married.

Hugh was waiting outside in the rain, and as he looked up and saw her coming he hastily stuffed an envelope into his pocket. He hurried to her with his bridegroom look in his eyes. Nancy thought she had never seen him look so much a gentleman. Proudly at his side she entered the building, refraining with difficulty from taking his arm.

Hugh had made the preliminary arrangements, and the casual little ceremony, with a clerk as the sole witness, was soon over. The whole thing was so brief, so matter-of-fact, so easy, so brisk, and so utterly unemotional, that when the two participants learnt that it was finished they looked at each other in amazement, wondering if such a trivial signing of names had transformed their lives. It was hard for Nancy to believe that she was really Mrs. Hugh Robjohn, and would be Mrs. Hugh Robjohn probably for life.

As reluctantly they left the office, the bride

instinctively dodged. She was expecting confetti. A strange silence was in her ears.

"It doesn't seem real, does it," she said to her husband, "without the 'Wedding March?'"

The bridegroom glanced desperately up and down the passage. "There ought to be a place somewhere here—an ante-room or something—where husbands could kiss their wives," he distinctly muttered.

But the passage was well lit, and people were everywhere. All Nancy could do was to squeeze his arm.

"Well," she said, with a wistful smile, "what do we do now?"

Hugh had not thought. "If it wasn't for the rain," he answered vaguely, "I meant to take you——"

"To Watson's Bay?" she laughed. "I'd go there—anywhere—with you now. But this rain——"

Hugh had his inspiration. "Would you like some afternoon tea?"

She seized the suggestion happily.

"Then we'll go to your tea-room," he said, glad to have got the trouble over. It was, in some essentials, a most disappointing wedding.

"Oh no, Hugh," she smiled; "I couldn't. Not there—with all the crowd. Wait a minute. Isn't there——? Yes, I know a nicer tea-room—more quiet."



It was in a lane in the heart of the business quarter, three stories up. A tiny place, decorated with tall screens, evidently constructed for newly-married couples. Nancy confidently led the way to the tallest screen in the darkest corner, and ordered tea. The waitress came, saw and smiled. She coughed as she brought the tea, which seemed to the married pair to arrive with disconcerting speed. The waitress had seen Nancy there before—with various men.

Nancy deliberately took off the glove of her left hand. The girl gaped and withdrew.

They let their tea grow cold, and at last had to drink it in a vain attempt to disarm suspicion. They both had the odd feeling that their kisses were unlawful. That tired old registrar with his business routine had not left much impression on their minds. But, as Nancy was conscious, glancing down occasionally to make sure, and feeling it with unconscious fingers meantime, there was the ring—horribly new and shining. They were certainly married.

Nancy leant over the absurdly small table to kiss Hugh again. During the process she heard something crackle in his breast-pocket. She recalled the envelope she had seen him stuff out of sight. The eternal curiosity of the wife was born.

“What’s the letter you were reading, Hugh, when I came up?” she demanded. “It’s a wife’s

privilege, isn't it, to read her husband's letters?"

Hugh remembered. He had quite forgotten—and surely he is to be forgiven?—that fatal message. His face grew grave.

"It's a telegram, Nancy," he said, pulling it out from his pocket and opening it. "It came just as I was leaving the office. I read it as I was waiting for you. Bad news. My mother is very ill."

She read it. It was a telegram from Hugh's father, telling him that his mother was not expected to live forty-eight hours. At the end were the curt words, "Come at once."

"I quite forgot to show it to you," said Hugh, watching the combined annoyance, solemnity, sympathy, and dismay in Nancy's mobile face. "But the sight of you in the street——" Nancy's eyes shone. "It's dreadful, anyhow," he went on; "but coming like this . . . !"

"You never told me about your mother, Hugh," Nancy said softly.

"I'd forgotten about her," he answered quickly. "Most sons do. You see, we grow up and go away, and she's at home, and we get to take her for granted."

Nancy understood with that brutal sanity of youth. She took her mother for granted too.

"I must catch the night's express for Melbourne," he quietly said.

"Oh, Hugh!" The woman in Nancy broke out in

a cry. Then, remembering where she was, she whispered in amaze, "Our wedding night!"

Her hands went to his shoulders, and touched granite; and she looked into his eyes and saw only spectacles—hard, inflexible.

"Dear, it's dreadful, I know," he whispered. "But I can't help it. I must go. I'm her only son. It would be different if I'd remembered her before; but now I've got to make it up to her—if I've time."

It seemed to Nancy that in his stern decision, in the stiffness of his body bound by those pliant, supplicating arms, he had never seemed to her before so adorable, so man-like. She, who was a coward, faced him bravely.

"How long?" she faltered.

"Only a few days, sweetheart. She's been ailing for months, and we knew that at any moment a sudden attack might——"

"It doesn't seem as if we were married at all!" she broke out petulantly. "This wedding in that dusty office, and the rain, and now——" She caught her fingers twirling the so shiny ring, and her eyes sought it. It reassured her, gave her strength. "I suppose I must let you go. Your mother——"

He comforted her uncomfortably across that table. She was only a child. And so they left the secluded tea-room and went out into the rain.

"I was going to take you to Stanwell Park," he said, "for our honeymoon. That must wait now. I've been trying to get a house, too; but I couldn't fix it up this morning. You must do that for me when I'm away, and when I come back we'll just go right into our own home."

He gave her the list of cottages got from the house-agents, and told her how much he could afford for a furnished cottage. It was not much, but to Nancy's ears it sounded like wealth.

"And while I'm away you'll need some money, dear," he added, and put some bank-notes into her absent hands. "I must go and pack up now," he said.

They drearily went to her home and paused in the rain outside the house. She dared not ask him in, though all her heart was crying out for the feel of his arms about her, and a long embrace from which she would not let him go. She felt superbly conscious that her woman-guile could break down his masculine resolve, and yet she knew if he yielded he would hate her on the morrow. More, she knew that on the morrow she would hate him. She could not stoop to cajole him, and if *he* stooped to be cajoled . . . ! If her idol should bend, why could it not break? She shuddered from the temptation of her love.

So they kissed, like relatives, in the rain, and went their own ways without looking back.

## CHAPTER XV

## IN WHICH NANCY SENDS A LETTER

**A**S Hugh Robjohn, married man, reached the central station that evening he was swooped upon by his wife.

"I'm coming with you," she breathlessly announced.

"Nancy!"

"Why not? I'm your wife."

Hugh looked at her in dismay. She was carrying a hand-bag, and was warmly dressed for travel. Her eyes were bright with the promise of adventure, And she was wholly beautiful.

Hugh was overwhelmed by this unexpected being he had married. Were all men so impetuous, so impulsive?—he had almost thought, so inconsiderate; but the idea was sacrilegious. He made the great discovery that all married men, sooner or later, make: they wed a woman and find a whirlwind. That is the most delightful thing about marriage.

It had never occurred to Hugh to take Nancy with him. He was going to a death-bed. What in the world would he do with his wife?

"It's impossible," he said almost irritably. "I'd have to stay at my father's place—and with my mother dying I couldn't possibly bring you. Nancy, you must be serious. Can't you see?"

Nancy, like any other woman of average intelligence, could, but wouldn't.

"It's our honeymoon," she pleaded.

"That must wait," he said almost sternly. "The train is starting in two minutes. I'll send you a telegram when I get there, and you must write every day." Then, before the careless, bustling crowd, suddenly taking her into his arms, he whispered brokenly, "My Nancy, it's as hard for you as for me. I'll be back in a few days, and then——"

He kissed her, and she clung to him. It seemed to him that if he let her go it would be for ever. He brushed that weakness aside and escaped.

Nancy watched his waving hand until it disappeared, then turned, and, tearing up the railway ticket she had bought, she went desolately home. That evening was the most miserable she had ever spent. Her mother contributed to the misery by her frequently expressed doubts whether her husband would ever come back. Mrs. Pinkstone had already decided that Mr. Robjohn's dying mother was only an excuse to allow him to flee to America.

But if Nancy's evening was miserable, how

adequately express the gloom at Hugh's boarding-house?

That afternoon before dinner he had "settled up" with Mrs. Fitzherbart, briefly informing that astonished landlady of the reason why he was going to Melbourne.

"But you'll come back?" Mrs. Fitzherbart gasped.

No, Hugh might not. He did not know how long he would be away, and he thought it better . . . .

"Oh, you needn't insist about paying me half-board and lodging," the landlady protested. Then, making the supreme sacrifice of a landlady, she said, "I'll keep your rooms for you, Mr. Robjohn, without charging you a penny. You can just come back when you like. You'll find everything just as you left it. You know you're always welcome. It'll be just like coming home."

It took Hugh some time to convince Mrs. Fitzherbart that he did not mean to come back, and the shock so upset her that the landlady came out in her with the anguished cry,

"Of course, if my place isn't good enough for you, if there's anything you object to, or if it's the extras, or anything, or my guests, I won't say another word."

"There, there!" Hugh said with a smile. "There's nothing I object to here. I've been very happy, but circumstances——"

"If it's the tariff," she interrupted eagerly, "if you can't afford it, I"—she made one of those rapid calculations that landladies are so expert in—"I could let you have the room for——"

Hugh stopped her with—audacious man!—his hand on her plump shoulder. Mrs. Fitzherbart almost purred.

"No . . . It's not money matters at all." He plunged her but further into her perplexities.

"Well," she said hopelessly, "if you must go, you must. But it'll be hard for us. You see," her eyes were suspiciously brightening, "it's such a happy family, like; we've all got so used to you; and if you go—the only man—I don't think the others would stay long. It'll mean looking for other lodgers, advertising and all the worry, and I had hoped that all that was done with. All of the others are so contented here. You kind of held the house together. I'll never get another man—they wouldn't come where they're the only ones; and it needs a man in the house. But there," she bravely pulled herself together, "if you must go . . . ."

Hugh hurried to finish his packing. Mrs. Fitzherbart promised to store his books as long as he liked, and then hastened to her room, where the poor lady gave way to tears.

But she could not afford to cry long, for there was her great news to tell the other boarders and the extra apple-tart to make for Mr. Hugh—he



always liked apple-tart, and the others could not stand it. She wanted to make his last meal in the house a memorable one.

It was. There was an air of gloom that made appetite impossible. Miss Catch had put on black. Sympathy for Hugh's mother oozed from every woman. They particularly wanted to know her ailment, and Hugh being unable to specify it, they all had interesting stories to tell of friends who, given up by all the doctors, were now as well as ever.

The leave-taking was the worst of all. He had to shake hands solemnly with everybody, and there was a violent struggle between Miss Swatts and Miss Catch to be the last to grasp his hand. His last vision of the boarding-house was a row of mournful ladies standing on the verandah fiercely waving handkerchiefs and shrilling good-byes.

With his departure gloom settled upon the house. The boarders sat silent, consumed by recollections. After a while they began to talk of him; but Mrs. Fitzherbart and Miss Catch early developed headaches and went to bed, and the others miserably followed. That night, despite the elaborate ritual of putting themselves to bed, the lights of the boarding-house went out early. The light had indeed gone out. A houseful of women—and no man.

Hugh was met at the Melbourne station by a

strangely shrunken little old man. Through his spectacles Hugh had some difficulty in recognising his father. His boyhood impressions had been of a commanding presence; he now saw him an insignificant old man. A strange pity surged through Hugh for the man in his bitter loneliness. Hugh had never imagined that he should come to pity his father.

In the first few words Hugh knew that his mother was dying—not expected to live that night. His father was helpless in this wanton interruption to the fixed habits of his old age. He clung to Hugh's arm as to a support.

"She's been asking and asking for you, Hugh," he quavered in the cab. "And now that you've come she might get over it."

The suburban street seemed mean, and the house, as the cab drew up at it, had not the fine appearance that in Hugh's memory had distinguished it from all the other houses. His spectacles showed it to him as quite ordinary.

His father led him eagerly to the sick-room door, and Hugh tip-toed in. The nurse lifted a warning finger. His mother, very thin and small, was sunk in a stupor of exhaustion. Hugh looked down on that remembered form.

And gazing through his spectacles at her, Hugh was suddenly conscious that he had done her a tremendous wrong. He had grown away from her.

She had always loved him, and now there had come into his life a greater love than any he had given her since childhood. She had given, given, given all her life. First the pain of bearing him, then the milk of her breasts, then the care and shielding of him, the anxious provision for him, the dreams and hopes for him. Given, given, given !

And her son had accepted it all carelessly, accepted it as his due. He had not even thought about it. He had all Life to think about.

And what had he given in return ? A few perfunctory caresses, a few casual confidences.

For a male child grows up and goes forth. And a mother's love never grows up. It remains for ever the charming, wilful, perverse, gullable, innocent, prideful, foolish thing it was when her child slept at her breast. A mother's love is eternal youth.

He had outgrown her, outpaced her, passed beyond her and the need of her into regions where she could not follow. She belonged to an earlier age ; he felt round him the impulses, the clamours of his own generation. He grew up, and she could not grow with him. She was hampered with her mother's heart that persisted in regarding him ever as a child. If only children did not grow up ! If only they never got beyond the need of mothering ! But life is not like that. Life demands new outlets, new opportunities, new conquests. And a man's mother cannot supply them. She can give

only one thing—love. This, by the way, happens to be priceless.

Hugh recalled his first departure from this house, the promise to write every week, the dreary ache at his distance from her, from the ministering of her hands, the caress of her voice. He missed her dreadfully the first month, eagerly awaited her long letters, devoured every scrap of family news, and wrote ingenuous double-postage accounts of his experiences to her. Then, very gradually, as new interests grew up around him, he found himself losing interest in that little corner of a vanished world in Melbourne. Life had taken him, and held him with firmer hands each month. So she had been crowded out of the first place in his thoughts. She was still his loved mother, but there were so many things that a mother could not do for him, that he must work out for himself. So self-reliance came, and his mother faded out into a dear memory.

When the first flush of enthusiasm was upon him Hugh wrote to his mother about the great book he meant to write. In her reply she expressed her belief in his ability to write any book, but said she was sorry he had not chosen to write a novel. He could get famous more quickly with a novel.

But when the "National Economics" had been torn up, and Hugh went to work on his novel, he had so far drifted away from making his mother his

confidante that he did not mention the change to her. And his marriage, too, the one thing that she would have been excited about, he had kept secret from her. Had it not been for her sudden illness he would have told her later. It had seemed to him that she should be told. A son drifts far from his mother on the currents of life.

During the last few months Hugh had hardly thought of her at all, and to those long, inconsequent chronicles of hers—who had called, what the weather had been like, and how his father's ailments were progressing (seldom a word of her own)—his answers had been hastily scribbled. She wrote regularly, whether there was anything to write about or not. His promised weekly letter came for months with such regularity that the first time he missed sending it his lapse elicited an agonised telegram from her wanting to know whether he was ill. He did not miss another week for a long time afterwards, but when he did she sent no telegram. She was getting accustomed to a grown-up son, disciplining her heart for its presumption in loving him so much.

On the train journey Hugh remembered that her invariable weekly letter had not come the week before, and he had not noticed the omission. He recalled, with a pang, that during the first year of their separation he had kept all her letters—in case she should die. And now her last letter had gone,

after a cursory reading, into the office waste-paper basket, the last she would ever write.

For his first two annual holidays Hugh had gone home. But in that little world Hugh had felt strangely awkward. He did not fit in. His parents had gone on in the old way, and the presence of a grown man vaguely disturbed them, though they could not discover the cause. His habits, too, had been formed. It was difficult for him to give up his smoking—his father disliked tobacco; and in that contented household he felt restless, constrained, bored. Yet his mother was delighted with him, and Hugh wondered, after returning to Sydney, at the tone in which his mother wrote. To her he was the perfect son. He was glad he had prevented his mother from seeing that he had grown out of the need of a mother. The little sacrifices he had made to his parents' prejudices seemed then more than worth while. The astonishing thing was that his mother apparently never saw how bored and cramped he had been.

After those first years he had taken his holiday elsewhere, usually going down to Melbourne for a brief day or so.

And now, standing over his mother's wasted form, Hugh knew that, despite his passionate desire, it was impossible for him to become again the child she still thought him. Life had taken him out of her arms for ever. He saw all that she had done for him,

the eternal sacrifices she had made of her life for him—and this was the end. He phrased it brutally in his mind: "There's not much fun in being a mother."

As he gazed through his glasses, suddenly his mother opened her eyes. Her face gladdened, and murmuring his childhood name, "Hughie," she was content. He bent down and kissed her.

"Why, you've got spectacles on, child," she smiled.

Hugh wondered whether he had told his mother that he was wearing spectacles. Fancy him not writing to her about that!

"The better to see you with!" he laughed back.

"They do suit you," she whispered adoringly. Then with a happy sigh, "I knew my boy would come. I'll be all right now."

The nurse lifted a warning finger, and Hugh tiptoed out, his mother's eyes following him, without her head moving, to the door.

That night she slept well, and with the morning the day-nurse was surprised at the improvement in her patient. Mrs. Robjohn had wonderfully rallied. The frowning doctor was non-committal.

Hugh wired the good news to Nancy, and followed it with a letter, promising to be back in Sydney in a few days. Then he was called back to the sick-room. His mother liked to lie silent and look at him. This was her great reward. The vague thought

phrased itself in her tired mind that it was worth while being so ill to have her boy back. Hugh, seeing all this through his spectacles, was bitterly reproachful of himself. He might have thought of her more. Mothers should never be taken for granted.

The next day a letter came from Nancy. He had been wiping his glasses as it came, and in his eagerness he opened it without putting them on. To his blurred vision the first few lines seemed horribly spelt, and there was no sign of grammar. Shocked, he remembered he had not his glasses on. He adjusted them and looked again.

He did not see a single mistake—not that the mistakes were not there—but the glowing love within those ill-written sentences obliterated their spelling. He saw only that Nancy yearned for him. For, separated so suddenly from him, and surer of his love because her mother had doubted it, the girl, ignorant in letter-writing, had poured forth her love in a torrent of frankness, overwhelming him with its fierce fire. It was certainly ill-written and badly spelt, though not to him ; for a girl may easily imitate in her conversation the speech of educated people, and yet find it difficult, for lack of practice in writing, to learn to spell.

And this was Hugh's first love-letter, her first confession to him. It pulsed with her belief in him, her longing for him.



"You dear!" Hugh breathed, kissing it. He hurried off to his room to reply.

There were other letters—a stream of them, and in each the same question. Was he coming back to-morrow? Hugh could not say. Some days his mother seemed better, then would come a serious relapse. The doctor told Hugh that he must not think of leaving. His presence was the only thing holding her to life.

So for three weeks the days dragged on. Then came a new note in Nancy's daily letter. She seemed worried, perplexed, anxious. Some grief was troubling her, carefully concealed, but breaking out in isolated exclamations that frightened Hugh. He put it down to her doubt that he did not mean to return, and reassured her. But to all his promises came the cry, "Come back, Hugh! Come back at once!" And then the cry was varied. "Come back," she wrote, "before it's too late."

Hugh went straight to his father, and told him that he must run up to Sydney for a day and return.

The little man quavered, "Don't go, Hugh. She's sinking. It'll only be a day or so now. You must stay till—till then."

So Hugh stayed another day. And then came her last letter.

"Hugh, dearie, I've been waiting and waiting but

you wont come. So you might as well know we were never really married. I am going away with another man. I'm not good enough for you dear I've found that out and I know its no good us trying to live together I'm not good enough that's all.

“your brokenhearted

“NANCY.”

Hugh did not even hear the doctor hastily pass the open door on his way to the sick-room. At last his thoughts grew coherent. He got up and ran to the telegraph office. His wire said that he was coming by that evening's express.

But on his return the reaction came, and the thought of his mother broke across his brain. Yet he must go. Something more than his mother's death was at stake. He must leave this death-bed to save a soul. But if he were too late . . . . ?

He could not find his father in the house, and at last he opened the sick-room door. The doctor, his father, and the two nurses were there, the doctor bending over the bed. From the look on the faces of the others Hugh knew before the doctor spoke.

Later, his father told him that just before her death his mother had asked for him. As he could not be found, she sighed, and whispered,

“Poor boy, he's out getting a breath of fresh air. He has been so good, sitting here so long with me. Thank God I had a son.”

So, still in her illusions, she went out into the night where there are none. Life may be kinder to mothers than perhaps we think.

## CHAPTER XVI

## IN WHICH NANCY KNOWS

NOW for Nancy!

It was about a week after her marriage and her husband's flight to Melbourne that Nancy began to worry. She said nothing to her mother; but as day after day followed, and still no sign of Hugh's return, the suspicion about herself, which she had at first thrust out of her mind as impossible, began to shape itself in her brain—a spectre of terror. Nancy felt herself in the grip of forces greater than herself: her days were clouded by her dreads, her nights saw those dreads become sinisterly visible against a lesser blackness. But through it all, and with a growing consciousness of the meaning of it all, she dared not ask advice from her mother. Oh, it was inconceivable! It simply couldn't happen—to her! Why should she be singled out?

At last, some three weeks after her marriage, her dread began to obsess her. Her mother could not help noticing her mental distress. Mrs. Pinkstone had all along had her suspicions about the hasty

marriage. At last Nancy was forced to hint of her trouble, and from Nancy's replies to her mother's skilled cross-questionings there was but one verdict. Nancy was going to have a child.

But Mrs. Pinkstone smiled sagely to her daughter's horror-stricken gaze. "It's all right, Nance; you're married all right—I always said my daughter could look after herself; and if the baby does come a little earlier, well, nobody ever can *tell*, they're so often born before their time. And it's your husband's fault, so he can't 'roust' on you."

"It isn't my husband's," said Nancy blankly.

"Not Bill's?" Mrs. Pinkstone sharply pinned her.

Nancy's dumb mouth gave all the answer her mother required.

Mrs. Pinkstone shrewdly smiled. "All the better, my dear. You're married, aren't you? You can keep your husband from knowing—any woman can."

"Not Hugh," the white-faced thing cried.

"Not if he's the sort to marry you like that? Why," she strove to reassure her, "lots of girls get married like that. Tell him it was his."

"But it can't be his," Nancy explained, "because—because I was always straight with Hugh."

Mrs. Pinkstone was—well, there is only her word, flabbergasted. "Nance," she explained in pain, "you oughter have some sense! Fancy you not thinking of that! I shud-der thought any girl

of mine would have seen to that." And then her moral disapproval gave way to stupefaction. "And yet he married you! Well, if he doesn't suspect, he can't make any fuss. He's let himself in for it, and he'll have to put up with it. Lots of husbands have ter."

"I think you horrible," Nancy broke out bitterly.

"Well, you knew when you married him."

Nancy went white. "I didn't! I didn't!"

Her mother was astonished. "I thought all along that was why it was so sudden."

"You thought that of me?" the girl cried, lifting futile hands as if to shield herself from the world. Oh, it was horrible—Life. She saw herself suddenly as a bad woman. Before, she had, in her ignorance, simply considered herself as a woman wantonly attacked by Fate. If people thought like that! If the whole world looked on her like that! If Hugh . . . "You thought that of me?" she whispered. "You thought I could deceive Hugh—my Hugh? Why, I don't think any woman who loved a man could do a thing so dreadful as that!"

Mrs. Pinkstone waved her anguish aside. "You must have had a suspicion."

"No, not even a suspicion. I didn't think about it at all."

Mrs. Pinkstone decided that Nancy was making a great fuss about nothing. These things happened in life as she knew it. Sometimes a girl was un-

fortunate and came to grief, but she was sure her Nancy would come out of it all right. Mrs. Pinkstone, in her occasional visits to melodrama, had always laughed at the falsity of the theatre. People did not make all that fuss over a child that came unwanted. They just put up with it, and the grandmother kept it with her daughter, and made a fuss about it, and loved it—and the neighbours who knew didn't mention it. For, after all, a child is a lovable thing, however it comes. So, to her, Nancy's distress was very natural, but a minor thing, soon to be accepted as inevitable. These things happened—that was all—and people got accustomed to them.

But Nancy seemed to take it so much to heart. Well . . . . .

"If you feel that way about it, my dear," she whispered cunningly, "you needn't have the child."

"Not have my child—kill it?" Nancy gasped, and fled that dreadful room in horror.

She knew now that she would always hate her mother, hate and distrust her. She would always have to be on guard against her—for her child's sake.

In her little room Nancy flung herself on her bed and fought her fight. Her mother had struck home. Despite Nancy's fierce denial, she knew now that that possibility had crossed her mind before she met Hugh again on her way to see Bill.

And she had carelessly dismissed it, sure, like the soldier in battle, that the bullet could not possibly find *her*.

And Hugh guessed nothing, and might never guess. If she went to him as his wife on his return he would never suspect. Why shouldn't she keep quiet about it?

But if Hugh suspected later on—and said nothing? That would be terrible. All his belief in her would be shattered by such a blow. No, she could not risk that. The thought of Hugh's belief in her would not be driven out. And her wonderful love for him, her great, dizzying ardour of love, made it impossible for this new Nancy to deceive him—to go on deceiving him all their lives. She must save Hugh. She must never ruin his life, his ideals. She owed that as the least of her debts to his great love for her. She could not face his clear, unquestioning gaze. She was frightened by his spectacles, and the truth about her that they would some day discover. If ever his eyes hardened with an incredible suspicion? No, she could not face that.

Yet what could she do? She could not stay at home with her mother. In her fear she credited her mother with the intention of doing away with her child, and the new mother-feeling that had taken possession of her gave her a desperate strength. Her mother was her enemy; Nancy



would not be safe with her. She must get away.

In her blind fear she thought of Bill. He was her child's father. And at the soft thought of her child she thrilled, and Bill suddenly took on a new shape in her thoughts. He had done her this wrong—and yet, was it such a wrong? The sweet thing she would hold in her arms! It would be hers—hers alone. She was sure of that.

And she had loved him then; she had been weak, overcome by his insistence; yet she could have resisted him. She knew herself to blame. And Bill would look after her, see that her child got its chance. Her child would be safe with its father.

So her great decision came. She belonged to Bill: the child had joined them for life. She would go to Bill. That would save her child—and save Hugh.

She was really married to Bill. That stupid little ceremony before the registrar meant nothing to her, had changed nothing. She would live with him as his wife. People would assume that she was married to him. If they did not, it would not matter. She would have her child.

And Hugh? At first she thought of slipping away without a word for him. She could not bear to see the change which would come into his face. And yet, some day, somehow, he would learn. No, she could not leave him like that. She must tell him. He would see that she was right. He would

forgive her and let her go. And then, by-and-by, he could get a divorce ; so that, at least, all his life would not be spoilt.

But she could not tell him to his kind face. She would write. And it must be at once. He might return any day ; he might be on his way now. There was no time to lose.

She wrote a note to Bill, imploring him to meet her that evening at the quay. Then she wrote to Hugh. She meant to tell him everything. But on the paper she could not express herself as she wanted. She could not write the dreadful words. So, after many trials, she wrote her brief note to Hugh. Better that he should think her a bad woman than that she should put down in black and white the dreadful truth that would freeze his love to ice. She posted both her letters together.

Now for Bill !

He had not been so surprised when Nancy disappointed him that evening she met Hugh. She had often "slipped him up" before, she had even broken with him before, but she had come back. Bill felt that she belonged to him. He could master this wonderful, changeable, beautiful, feminine thing. It was the woman in her ; and Bill was tolerant, because sure of himself.

He grew anxious, however, when he found that she was not to be seen at the lunch-room. In his desperation he asked another waitress about her,

but she could tell him nothing. After his lunch Bill went to the manageress, but all she could say was that Miss Pinkstone had suddenly left. She was too much annoyed at the loss of her prettiest waitress, who brought more regular customers to the rooms than any other three, to add the information about Miss Pinkstone's marriage, which, frankly, she did not believe. She also expressed herself unable to give the gentleman Miss Pinkstone's private address. Gentlemen had no right to demand girls' private addresses.

And Bill, with a sullen heart, went off. It may strike us as curious that Bill did not know the private address of the girl he had so often taken out at night. But in Bill's rather narrow experience the girls you met casually did not usually volunteer that information; and, as for himself, he was always careful not to give his own address till, at least, he knew his acquaintance would not make a bad use of it. He had heard of girls coming to a man's office, for instance, and making a fuss. But as he knew he could trust Nancy, she now had his business address. All he knew of her home was that it was in Mosman; and the directory failed to print any one of the name of Pinkstone—probably because Mrs. Pinkstone was always moving to a cheaper cottage. Bill did not even know whether Nancy was living at home or in a boarding-house. In fact, his knowledge of her was bounded by herself.

And Bill was perhaps right when he decided that that was an ample store of knowledge. The main thing was that Nancy was able to get out any evening.

So, now maddened with jealousy—for in his crude, physical way this youth was sorely in love with Nancy's startling beauty—Bill roved the streets on the mere chance of meeting her. He did not think of looking for her at the office of the registrar for births, deaths, and marriages.

For a week he hung about the tea-rooms in search of her, then he took to haunting the Mosman boat. He was now hungry with desire for her. Memories of past evenings only made his torture the more bitter.

But one evening, as he was waiting at the entrance to the Manly wharf at the quay, his quickly roving gaze was drawn to the figures of two girls getting change at the little window. One was certainly pretty. As she passed him on her way to the turnstiles she shot a glance of obvious admiration at him. Bill was accustomed to this, but he could never help reacting to that visual caress. He forgot Nancy, hurriedly paid his fourpence, and passed in.

This sudden decision was not lost on the girl. She communicated it to her friend in that wireless telegraphy peculiar to girls, and both giggled. They were smartly dressed in the cheapest of imitations

of the latest style—girls who had been working all day in a milliner's shop, and now surged forth to meet life on a ferry-boat. To them Bill promised excitement, giggles, adventure, life; and his appearance seemed to them as that of the perfect gent. And as neither knew for certain, though both were sure, which of them he preferred, there was the added rapture of uncertainty and the supreme joy of combat. They took their seats in the crowded boat, conscious that the gent was just behind them. He carelessly chose a seat that put him in their full view. Both he and they knew all the rules of the game.

It was apparent to Bill, behind his opened paper, that the girls were vivaciously discussing him, and from the edge of his "Sun" his gaze frequently strayed to the younger girl's face. It was disconcerting to his elaborate unconcern, yet distinctly stimulating to his interest, to find that each time he looked at her she was looking at him. Immediately, however, he glanced up, her demure gaze fell to his boots and dwelt there. She seemed to find them worthy of patient study. And Bill's gaze, growing bolder, summed up the superbly unconscious face. The result was satisfactory. Bill decided that she would do. His eightpence and his evening would not be wasted.

The next act in this drama came, as was correct, from the younger girl. The next time she found Bill's

eyes on her she deliberately, but apparently quite unconsciously, stared back at Bill. Their eyes were held steadily for what to both of them seemed an age, then the girl sucked in her lower lip, and turned with an eager remark to her companion. She knew that Bill would want to kiss that lip. All the rest of the way down she did not once glance his way; but just before the boat reached the wharf she gave him the invitation of the quick glance for which he was impatiently waiting.

Bill rose immediately the two girls stood up, and in the crush on the gangway it was inevitable that his arm should brush the younger girl's shoulder. Hardly looking at her, he raised his hat and muttered an apology. The girl merely shot him a look that made his pulses gallop.

He followed them down the Corso, and on to the ocean beach. There they halted to gaze at the few surf-bathers who were in the water under the electric lights. Bill sauntered slowly past them, in order that they should recognise him as the clumsy but polite man on the gangway. They appeared perfectly unconscious of his presence. This Bill acknowledged was in full accord with the etiquette of the situation. The moment had arrived to stalk his quarry. In his aimless strollings he at last paused at the side of the younger girl. He stood gazing at the bathers, absorbed in reverie and gently smoking his cigarette—a picture of the

perfect gent at his ease. Evidently finding the bathers uninteresting, he glanced round, and found also that the younger girl was in the act of glancing round—at him. Their eyes met—in his a confident boldness, in hers a shy invitation.

He murmured, "Nice evening, isn't it?" and raised his hat.

Introductions followed, only Christian names being used. The hunt was at an end. All the actors had correctly played their parts in a game they knew by heart.

Bill put up with the company of the other girl all that evening. With brutal bluntness he made it quite clear on whom his handkerchief had fortunately fallen, and the elder girl, after a few futile efforts to engage his attention, faded out of the conversation, with a bitter memory of other nights when she was the younger girl in her quest of Life. It was all in the game. She had had her chance. So, though to Bill's sledge-hammer hints that perhaps she might leave them to themselves, and her friend's traitorous acquiescence in those hints, she refused to go. She filled in an uncomfortable evening by pretending not to hear the brisk conversation that rattled between the man and the woman of his choice. It consisted chiefly of slangy "cheek," delivered with smiles that blunted its rudeness, and interspersed with "gags" from the latest musical play.

All the way on the return trip on the boat Bill sat with his arm round the younger girl's waist, which, of course, was not noticed by either girl. In saying good-night at the quay, Bill pulled the younger girl aside and rapidly fixed up an appointment with her for the following evening—unaccompanied.

"You couldn't get a bloke for Sal?" she asked. "She's orl right, you know; and she ain't had much fun."

"Not much!" said the bloke heartily. "*I* don't want her, an' I don't know any other fellow who does."

Which disposes of the elder girl, who in the future would have to get what interest she could out of her friend's confidences about her new "boy" over the sewing-machine in the shop.

Another chapter in Bill's life had begun. He had quite forgotten Nancy.



## CHAPTER XVII

## IN WHICH NANCY SEES THE LIGHT

BILL'S acquaintance with the girl progressed with that rapidity of haphazard affairs of this sort. She was a quiet little girl, with a limited outlook on life. The only articles in her faith were to have a good time—and her artless prettiness ensured that—and to take care of herself with men. She had little passion in her eager heart. She liked being kissed, but she had learnt that a girl who gives way to a man is a fool. There was no morality underlying her standpoint; it was merely her strain of common sense. She had heard of girls who had "gone wrong." The game was too risky for her. She meant to be married, and any surrender of herself would militate against her chances.

So that Bill found his affair not at all to his liking. The girl was lovable, delightful to kiss, but always on her guard. Bill tired.

And at this stage he received Nancy's note. It woke a hundred tormenting memories. After all,

there was no one like Nancy. And she had been fond of him, too. There had been frequent quarrels, but she had always come back to him.

He went eagerly to meet her, and the glow of her gorgeous hair as she came from the boat strangely discomposed him . . . He felt none of that patronage that he had always shown in his recent affair.

But as he stepped forward to greet her he was conscious of a change in her. She was much more quietly dressed than in the earlier days, and her face seemed less alluringly provocative. She looked to him, too, as in some way refined. Her eyes were sadder, her lips not so outspokenly desirous of being kissed. It struck him, like a blow, that she looked a lady. He felt a vague inferiority to her that hurt him.

But her eager greeting restored him to his tiny pedestal.

"Where y' been all this time, Nancy?" he questioned.

"I've been ill," she carelessly lied.

"Oh, that's it?" he exclaimed. "That's what makes you look so different."

"I want to talk to you, Bill. It's important. Where can we go?"

He suggested Watson's Bay, which held pleasant memories ; but she insisted on Manly, which was more crowded.

The boat was packed, and Nancy guided Bill to a seat in the most thronged portion, where the people about them made private conversation impossible.

It was Saturday night, and from the closely sandwiched terraces of the far-stretched inland suburbs the youth of Sydney had come for a whiff of sea-air, the zest of a new horizon. The big boat was packed with lovers and would-be lovers. Two and two they sat communing.

The girls had, despite the cheapness of their dresses, that Parisian, yet sharply individual, touch that distinguishes the Sydney girl. The warm climate, hot yet not tropical, and with winters like the traditional but seldom seen English spring, makes them blossom soon. The girl of sixteen has the figure of the English woman. The pallid face she wears touches with refinement a beauty that is, above all, healthy. In this new land the restraints of older countries are cast off: the sunlight kills conventional germs. The sun made the Latins, as the lack of it made the Teutons; and Australia is a vast laboratory wherein is being worked out an experiment new to history. A solid Teutonic race is placed under the rays of the sun, and a strange witchery is worked. The result is perplexing: a new race with the sober basis of Puritanical Britain and the gaiety of the Latin races—their laughing irresponsibility, their alertness—perhaps shallowness—of mind, their quick grace of body.

So these girls were fully conscious of themselves, able—and willing—to look a man in the face, ready to meet him on equal terms, quite able to take care of themselves.

The floating gossamers from their hats flung themselves in tantalising caresses about the shoulders of the men. Laughter and chuckle and whisper made a faint accompaniment to the music at the other end of the boat. The cool sea-breeze stirred wisps of hair and waiting hearts. And on this bouquet of youth and ardour the imp of Love gaily and lightly sipped. It was Life out of her corset, stretching her cramped body.

And Bill, watching Nancy glorious at his side, felt the contagion of the boat, and craved for her lips. But what he saw was merely her profile.

At Manly they strolled along towards Fairy Bower, a way they had gone once before. But a vacant seat by the track showed Nancy where she must tell Bill her secret.

“We’ll sit here,” she announced.

Bill demurred. “Why not go out on the cliff—where we were before?” he eagerly suggested.

“No, I must tell you here.”

They sat and watched the strollers, two and two, pass them, all too engrossed in their talk to notice them.

“Bill,” she began, in a low, hurried voice, “I’m not all right.”

He started. "You mean——?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"When?"

"Oh, I've been worrying about it for nearly a month—that's why I wouldn't see you; but I'm sure now."

"But you can't be sure!" he said, overcome by this catastrophe, and vainly trying to think out its meaning to him.

"I asked my mother," she said tonelessly.

"You told your mother?" The man's voice was pitiable. "You shouldn't 'a' done that, Nancy!"

"I had to."

Bill sat silent. It was the first time he had got a girl into trouble. The possibility of such a thing he had carelessly brushed aside whenever he heard of it happening to another man.

A chance hope came to him. "And you say I'm to blame?" he said cruelly.

"Bill!" said Nancy in straining horror. "I've always been straight to you. You know it."

"How do I know?" he snarled back. "How do I know it ain't a try-on? I've heard that sort of yarn before, but it won't work with me. See?"

She only stared at him, wondering amazedly how she could have ever liked him.

"Anyhow," he said craftily, "you can't prove it."

She was stung into speech. "It's true, Bill; it's true. It's done now, and can't be helped."

"I've heard of girls who . . . . ."

Nancy saw in his eyes the same hideous suggestion that her mother had made. Was all the world so horrible? And, against her will, came the memory of one who was not like the world. But she put that memory from her.

"No," she said, with a long shudder, "I'd never do that. Look here, Bill, you got me into trouble. I don't blame you, because I could have stopped you. But—it's up to you to help me."

Bill sat staring at the ocean, revolving her suggestion in his troubled mind. So far he had contemplated marriage as a thing infinitely remote on Life's horizon. He knew he would get married some day, but he was quite satisfied with the present. He liked girls, and he could usually get his way with girls. He had with Nancy. And there were always plenty of girls. On the whole, he didn't see why this sort of life of his might not go on indefinitely. Once, after his first quarrel with Nancy, he had seriously considered the question of marriage with her; but the fact that she had not a "bean" settled the matter. He could not afford to marry for years yet; and Nancy was not the sort to wait for him.

Yet, if Fate thus cruelly forced his hand, and there was no other way to avoid being saddled with an annoying responsibility, he would marry Nancy. He had never liked anybody as well as Nancy.

And now, in her face, he saw a new, unanalysable beauty. It escaped his definition, but it was there.

“Orl right, Nancy, I’ll marry yer!” he gave his magnanimous verdict.

In her agitation, she thought she had told Bill about her marriage. It surprised her to see that he was still ignorant. Oh, if only she had not married Hugh! How easily everything would have sorted itself out!

“I’m married already, Bill,” she said. “Didn’t I tell you?”

After the first shock of his amazement, Bill huddled back on the seat with a grunt of relief. He had been let off, after all! But the happiness of his escape was swiftly marred by the thought of Nancy’s perfidy.

“You’ve been married all the time?” he said, with savage fingers on her arm.

“No.”

“Not——? Then when?”

“About a month ago.”

“Not to that bloke with the window-panes?”

“Yes.”

“Then what the devil do you come to me for, you——!” He flung his insult spitefully at her.

“Don’t you see,” the girl implored him, “he doesn’t know.”

“Course he don’t know,” the man sneered, “He wouldn’t ’a married you, would he?”

Wearily she let the sneer pass. "It's like this. Bill," she patiently explained. "I didn't know—when I married him. I never suspected. And then he had to go away to Melbourne the very day he married me, and he hasn't come back yet. His mother's dying. I'm not his wife really, am I? And now—oh, Bill, I can't go back to him like this. I can never go back to him now. Don't you see?" she cried wildly, as Bill sullenly stared—"don't you see that I can never be his wife—now? I'm *your* wife, Bill. Our child makes me your wife. I'll come and live with you. He'll let me alone. And if he doesn't, I'll have to tell him, and then he'll let me go. He'll never come between you and I, Bill. Take me away, dear, and I'll be a good wife to you."

Poor Nancy! She lived in a world of novels. Her literary outlook was through the sensational sixpenny novel. Life, as she knew it, was a much starker and cruder thing than the romance of her reading; but in her woman's heart she believed in the sure coming of a hero who would snatch her away from life's sordidness into the realms of sentimental romance. Such a hero she had identified in Hugh. He fulfilled all the conditions. And though she had had to renounce him, she still resided in the realm of the sentimental novel. The thing she proposed to Bill seemed to her, in her huge ignorance of life, the only possible thing to do. It was often done in novels.



But Bill was not out of a sixpenny novel. He lived at home, as no villain is ever reported to have done, with his father, his mother, a maiden aunt, and two innocuous and faded sisters ; and again, unlike the villain of fiction, he was careful to pay his mother a few shillings a week for his keep. And now this mad girl confidently expected him to go forth into the world, where he would have to pay for his keep—pay for her keep too—and take on the responsibility of making a living and keeping up a house. His salary merely sufficed for his amusements. And she was another man's wife !

He explained some of these difficulties to Nancy.

"Take you away?" he said. "Why, I haven't got the cash ; and if I left my job I'd have to look for another."

"Well, couldn't we live here, in Sydney?"

"No. How could I pay for a house on my screw?"

"I'd go back to work again," she eagerly suggested.

"Fat lot of good that'd do ! Besides, it ain't as if you were my wife. Then I'd *have* to look after you."

"I *am* your wife, your real wife, Bill."

The suspicious look returned to Bill's narrow eyes. "Yes, but you can't prove it. I'm not taking another bloke's job—not much."

"But our child?"

"Well, it's all right. You're married, aren't you? That blighter will think it's his."

"You won't take me, Bill?" the girl cried. "I'd keep straight with you—as I've always been."

Bill's anger broke out. "You go and chuck yourself away on that blighter, and then you come to me to take you back! D'yer think I'm the sorter mug to take on another bloke's leavings? And oh, Nancy," he cried, as the realisation of all that he had lost came over him, "you madden me yet, you! If only you'd been all right!"

"Bill," she said simply, "I can't face him again. I daren't. It's for the child—your child."

"See here, Nancy, I won't do it. You've got no claim on me to keep you. But——" His eyes glistened as he leaned to her. "What's the use o' talking? You won't go back to him anyhow?"

"I couldn't!"

"Well, it's all the same as before, ain't it? I'm in love with you, Nancy—more'n I ever was before. Forget all about that blighter, and be my friend—same as you used ter be." He leaned closer, one arm along the back of the seat. "Let's go for a walk to the cliffs—up there, where I took yer that first night. You remember?"

Nancy remembered. She looked at him straightly. "I've done with that, Bill," she said. "I'd live with you if you took me in for the child. But not that!"

She rose, and Bill faced her. He tried to clutch her, but saw some couples passing on the track, and drew back.

"You can't, Bill," she said hurriedly. "I'm done with all that."

She moved away.

"And now," she said, more to herself than to him, "there's nothing left to me but . . . ."

He was following, but she almost ran; and, with a oath, he let her go.

The idea of suicide slowly formed itself in her brain. That was the only way out. She would throw herself overboard on the way back.

But before she got even to the boat she knew she could never do that. She was no longer a free agent. There was another life to care for—a strange, hidden, wonderful life. And suddenly the great exultation of motherhood came to her. Her body was a sacred thing, and she, with all her anguish, but a humble worshipper before a miraculous shrine.

## CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH THERE IS A HINT OF HONEYMOON

WHEN Hugh, hurrying from the Melbourne train after a sleepless night of anxiety, came to Nancy's home in Mosman, it was Nancy herself who answered his peremptory knock. He had been prepared for tragedy, for despair; but he had not anticipated in finding these in the white-faced, large-eyed girl who was his wife.

Yet his relief at her actual presence was so great that he reached forward to take her in his arms—to make sure that it was Nancy. She drew him into the dark tunnel of the hall, and there, unresisting, she let him kiss her.

"I thought you'd gone away! Nancy, your letter!" he said, holding her close.

She lay in his arms, content. This solved all her difficulties—in the easiest way. A shamefully easy thing, perhaps; but Nancy was worn out with worrying—and the hunted animal has not much spirit left. At the mere sight of his lank tallness she had felt all her doubts drop from her. He was

her destiny, visible, close, protecting. She gave up.

She lied easily without looking up. "That letter, Hugh? I sent it just to bring you back. I thought you were never coming. So I had to—just to see if you really cared. But you'll forgive me, won't you, Hugh, my husband?"

His relief was so great that he forgave her without a further thought of the paltriness of the deceit she had practised on him. Women were like that—all heart; and women in love were not responsible except to their own hearts. Manlike he was grateful for the greatness of that love which could so insistently prompt so big a deceit. A man would not have done a thing like that; but women—that devotion to a bigger thing than mere straightness was, after all, one of the things that men loved in them. Hugh wished he could have done it.

(Marvellous spectacles! But Hugh, being so hotly in love, could have seen no clearer without them. All lovers wear blinkers.)

And Hugh, looking down at that lovely face, saw in it only the strain of that long month of waiting. How he had tried her with his absence! No wonder she had sent that letter. He wished she had sent it sooner.

So the two were happy. After Bill's repulse Nancy had burnt her boats. She was no longer a free agent, and all her instinctive horror of deceiving Hugh vanished at the thought of her child.

That was the force greater than herself that drove her, with lowered eyes, into Hugh's arms. Nancy felt herself unable to resist the mother-jealousy that the meekest of animals will show when her young are threatened. She said to herself that she would pay the penalty herself—so long as her child was provided for, so long as it was born without taint. And the penalty was big enough and long enough. It was her lifelong silence in the face of Hugh's clear, unquestioning spectacles. But she would have no further deceits for him. She would serve him and make him so wonderful a wife. But she would have to sacrifice Hugh too. But he would never know. Perhaps, when she was dying, she would tell him, and then he would forgive her. Surely she could build up a life of love for him so great, so broad, so high, that he would never peer beneath it for its foundations of deceit.

Buffeted by Life, desperate, maddened by the fear in her mother-heart, she clung to Hugh, her husband, with a sudden grateful sense of the numbing of all her terrors.

She drew him to the tiny drawing-room, an apartment used only by her mother for occasions of ceremony, such as the monthly interviews with the rent collector. There she left Hugh, and he sat carefully, very straight and handsome and fine, on an uncomfortable, spindly chair, and listened to the colloquy of low and agitated voices that drifted un-

intelligibly in from the recesses of the back of the house.

Nancy returned, flushed but triumphant. She had won her point. Her mother would be in directly to receive him. She made Hugh sit down again, and leant over him, stroking his arm, as if the touch of him reassured her.

"Now I've found you again," Hugh smiled triumphantly at her, "I'm not going to let you out of my sight. We're starting for our honeymoon to-day."

The girl blanched, for no respite was to be given her. She must start her deception now. And what was she to have a honeymoon?

"No, Hugh," she whispered; "I don't want one. Why can't we wait till we get a house, and then just go straight there?"

Hugh was relieved. He had made the honeymoon suggestion because it had seemed to him the right, though idiotic, course to follow. But for him the honeymoon had been slain by the comic artists.

"Ah, the house!" he said eagerly. "Have you found one?"

She remembered that, before her world had been darkened, she had spent a few days wandering round Mosman looking for houses to let, and she had picked out a cottage that she had thought ideal. She told Hugh that it had a sign up, but it was apparently occupied. The people might be out of it by now.

"Let's have a look at it!" he said with boyish eagerness; but already footsteps were coming along the passage.

Mrs. Pinkstone, large and steely and slippery in her best black, entered. Nancy curtly introduced her, and Mrs. Pinkstone shook hands with her son-in-law. She was really a common old woman, with as much refinement and individuality as a sack of coals—which, indeed, in her dress she somewhat resembled—and with a mind that had never soared above very bad cooking and the price of meat. Yet through his spectacles he saw only Nancy's mother—a poor, sad woman ill-used by Life, never given a chance to develop herself, saddened by a forced contemplation of sordid things, a soul that had never escaped the prison-bars of the scullery, a slave in lifelong bondage to grocers' bills, and yet, being Nancy's mother, miraculous. She had given him Nancy. She wore the only halo that man has to spare for woman.

(No need to note again that they were marvellous spectacles.)

He was impressed by Mrs. Pinkstone's perfect politeness. In her heart she was reckoning how much a week she could demand from Nancy's husband, wondering whether, when they got over the foolishness of the first month, she might invite herself to live with them.

Nancy left them to get on her hat.



Mrs. Pinkstone suddenly sighed; two tears appeared in her red-rimmed, watery eyes. Now that Nancy was not there she could settle things with this son-in-law.

"It's such a loss to me — her going," she whimpered.

"Yes, you'll miss her. I'm sorry I've got to take her away."

"Oh, it wasn't her that I'll miss so much—she never was much at home, and she never did a hand's turn of work when she was at home. I had to make her bed for her. But she used to help to pay the bills with her wages. And now that she's going, I don't know 'ow I'll get along by myself."

Hugh saw only a mother mourning for her child, pretending, with a palpable effort, that she was regretting a mere sordid matter of rent in order to conceal her deeper feelings. He appreciated her heroic effort to spare him pain, her courage in jesting about the purse strings when it was her heart-strings that were being torn. He grasped her by the hand—a hard, toil-calloused hand—and told her that when they were settled she must often drop in for lunch with his wife.

(They *were* wonderful glasses!)

He was in this generous mood when Nancy, having taken, for a woman, an incredibly short time to pierce a flimsy flat thing and two hair-pads with three long spikes, rushed into the room.

She had her doubts of Hugh's susceptibilities to her mother's ready tears. And her suspicions were confirmed by the noble attitude she found him in.

"Come on, Hugh," she cried, and piloted him safely from the dangerous shoals of her mother's grief.

As soon as they got outside the gate she turned brightly to Hugh. "Mother been cadging?"

"Cadging?" he asked, at a loss.

"For money."

"No," he answered in all his foolish sincerity. "She made an effort—just not to let me see how she felt parting with you—to tell me that she would miss your wages more than she would miss you. But I know mothers. I knew mine."

Nancy looked at his shining spectacles, which the sun had burnished with its glory, and decided not to inform him that she knew *her* mother. Then, with her quick sympathy, she asked him of his mother. He told her of her death, of her blind love for him; but he did not tell her, though Nancy would have thrilled to know it, that at her letter he had forgotten his dead mother in his great anxiety for her.

So, with glittering sunlit spectacles triumphantly on his splendid nose, and Nancy, pale yet glorious, at his side—for she had seen once more that Hugh simply could not see the matter-of-fact, sordid things of life, and so would never see the sordidness in her

—Hugh strode along the Mosman streets in search of the perfect cottage.

The perfect cottage, when enthusiastically pointed out by Nancy, he found to be very like its neighbours. In fact, the street was a fantastic gallery of modern suburban cottages, facing each other across the road like girls in their best dresses, twisted and contorted, ornamental and over-ornamental, with all the latest architectural frillings and fantasies of modern suburban fashion.

It was a street of family likenesses, despite the heroic efforts of the speculative architect, on very limited means, to make each cottage an individual creation. Every cottage must have a verandah, a front door, a hall, a kitchen, some windows, a chimney or two, and a roof. And each must occupy only the fifty-feet frontage allowed it, and stand in line with the others behind its little garden plot.

So the family likenesses persisted, particularly in the red tiles that crowned each member of it. And all the verandahs faced the street—a simple arrangement that made for uniformity; but as the sun blazed all the day on one set of verandahs and left the other set alone, the comfort of one side of the street was sacrificed to the æsthetics of street design.

A closer examination, however, revealed certain unessential unlikenesses. The syndicate that had bought and subdivided the land, after specifying

that each cottage should contain the same number of rooms, had allowed the architect full scope to vary the designs. He had done this with a sort of dogged consistency, mixing up the same architectural features in different dispositions for each cottage. Thus several had a curly front porch, with a semicircular opening in the wall outside the front door; others had battlements of shiny brick or glaring stucco; portions of others were gorgeous with false woodwork painted in bright colours, patches of green shingles on the walls, ornate designs in brickwork, and curly excrescences to the verandah posts. These features were repeated with variations, or fantastically combined, all along the street.

However, Nancy picked out the perfect cottage with ease. It looked very new and very shiny, and the garden was only a tiny plot of clay and rock.

"We could make a lovely little lawn and garden here," she whispered eagerly, as they unlatched the grotesque little gate with its name "The Willows," bravely flaunting its untruth at them.

The cottage was occupied, but on her first visit Nancy had learnt that the tenants had contemplated moving out.

To Hugh's manipulation of a fantastic bronzed knocker on the brilliant apple-green front door a thin drab of a woman, carrying a smudgy-looking baby, appeared. She said they could, of course,

look over the house. They were leaving at the end of the week, because on the arrival of Amaryllis—the label they had attached to the smudgy baby—her fourth, they had found that the house was too small.

Apparently the architect of this street had not guessed at the possibility of a fourth. Statistics were on his side, of course, and he had done his best to buttress them; but the human factor cannot always be eliminated.

They entered, the woman incessantly apologising for the state of the house. With three children and a young baby! But before the inspection began Nancy had to enquire all about Amaryllis. To Hugh's mild astonishment she seemed wildly excited over the smudge. To him it looked merely a dirty baby, solemn-eyed and inert. To Nancy it was a miracle of loveliness and weight. She insisted on taking it—and took it as if all her life she had done nothing else. She talked to it, too, in the universal language of motherhood. Though Amaryllis merely blinked, she seemed to understand the language. Her mother gave, proudly, a complete list of the ailments of Amaryllis, who, Hugh learned with surprise, was subject to convulsions. He felt curious to see what that Egyptian sphinx would look like in convulsions. The mother, flattered by his interest, volubly explained. Nancy insisted on carrying Amaryllis as they made their

inspection. She was even more enthusiastic about Amaryllis than about the house.

Yet her enthusiasm was infectious; and though to Hugh the cottage seemed to make up in decoration what it lacked in size, he agreed with Nancy that it would suit them admirably.

"You see," said Nancy with pride, "every room is done up in a different colour, with a frieze to match. I love friezes."

They were certainly notable, those friezes. The paper-hanger had entered into his work with the fine frenzy of an artist. From the pink walls of the dining-room the purple frieze shouted, while in the violet drawing-room rich blooms of purple glowed imperially. In the green kitchen, red-coated huntsmen raced over green fields, round and round, just below the ceiling. Hugh's spectacles dizzily tried to catch them up.

The house was to let furnished, and the furniture was of the auction-room variety, with plenty of polish and style and a modest dubiety about comfort. In the drawing-room (violet) it was principally plush, with shaky bamboo chairs that Hugh felt could only be used by a desperate man. The imitation marble mantelpiece, cunningly simulated by reckless green straggling markings on a mottled background of painted wood, was set off by an over-mantel composed of glass, cut into sections by bamboo framing and bamboo brackets, designed—

as was apparent from their present appearance—to hold china cats and Japanese fans.

The hall was a straight, narrow passage, into which the hall-stand of highly polished imitation walnut uncomfortably jutted. It was covered with a gaudy, and from the smell, recently polished linoleum. This was evidently the loving labour from which their knock had taken the woman. The rest of the house-tidying, and that of the baby, had been left for this important task. Off this tunnel the various rooms, including the miniature bathroom, opened; and at the end of it was the tiny (green) kitchen, pantry, laundry, gas-stove, and scullery—a marvel of compression.

“This is the bedroom,” the woman announced, with an apology for the bed not being made.

The bedroom was a heavenly blue, and, at the sight of it, Nancy lost interest in Amaryllis. Despite her excitement, she could not look at Hugh. It seemed wrong.

“Yes,” she said hurriedly, and came out to Hugh, who was standing uneasily on the threshold.

She was glad he had not come in. The big, black-enamelled bedstead, with its bright brass knuckles, was not for masculine eyes. But in her swift glance round she had seen everything, and instantly decided to put blue satin ribbons at the top of the mosquito curtains.

With an affectionate farewell of the mite of

solemnity named Amaryllis, Nancy led Hugh outside. As the gate clicked she turned to him.

"Isn't it a duck of a house?" she exclaimed.

It was not at all like Hugh's dreams of a home, yet he reflected that he could not afford to build dreams, and architects evidently did not build them on speculation. And Nancy's delight infected him in his lover's enthusiasm. If she thought it perfect she would be happy. He decided that it was a woman's business. He could easily find room for most of his books in the drawing-room. And afterwards, when he got his salary raised, or his novel was a success, he could build the perfect house of his dreams. He did not pause to reflect that the perfect dream might not be Nancy's dream.

"It'll suit us splendidly," he said, and off they set, hot-foot, to the office of the local estate agent.

There Hugh fixed the matter. They were to take possession on the following Monday.

"And now," Hugh said, smiling down on Nancy, "we'll go to your place and get your luggage."

"Why?"

"We're going on our honeymoon."

"Oh, Hugh, I couldn't waste the time. With all the house to do up, and new curtains to make, and getting it scrubbed, and made comfortable. I've no time for honeymoons."

Hugh saw his wife swallowed up in the house-keeper.



There is a Maori legend that God told the first woman that her business was to bear children. She, comparing her lot with that of man, naturally objected, and the whole elaborate scheme of things was at a standstill. Then, in the interests of the race, God compromised. He remixed the clay from which she had been carelessly made, and remodelled her, making her one-third mother, one-third clothes-hook and one-third housekeeper. The arrangement worked perfectly. As woman was a housekeeper she would naturally want a house to keep. This predisposed her to look with favour upon the man who could give her the house. But it was not necessary to stalk him. For, being a clothes-hook, the woman naturally wanted to hang clothes on herself, and did it enthusiastically. And when next man came upon her he noticed a vague difference in shape and hue, and felt called upon to investigate. So, instead of her stalking him, he pursued and captured her, gave her the cave to keep clean, and thus the race began. And so admirable was the three-fold composition of woman that the race has been going ever since.

"But the house is furnished," he said impatiently, with the unfathomable ignorance of the male.

"Furnished? There's only the furniture. Why, we've got to get the linen, and the towels, and the pots, and the bedding, and the——"

Hugh stopped the flood, for he had his superb inspiration.

"We'll go to an hotel—a Sydney hotel!"

"A honeymoon in Sydney—in an hotel!" cried Nancy, staggered at his originality.

But Hugh pointed out that she could buy the things for the house and have her honeymoon at the same time, and, stipulating that it should be a very private hotel, she assented.

That evening they set forth in a taxi-cab for their honeymoon hotel, Hugh with his baggage and Nancy with a dress-basket.

They assured themselves, as they drove up to the very private hotel, that no couple could look less like a honeymoon pair; but as they entered the entrance hall and signed their names, the whole staff of servants let them know that they knew. The sole thing that puzzled them was what had become of the rice and the confetti. Nancy signed the register, "Mrs. Hugh Robjohn," with the ease that came from assiduous practice on her return that evening Hugh had gone to Melbourne; but she caught a knowing look in the clerk's eye, and felt her back being pierced by the wise glare of the hall-porter's terrible eye.

The public dinner was a torture to them, and on the stairs and in the passages giggling chambermaids, and covertly smiling guests, made them wilt with consciousness.

That evening Hugh, furiously smoking a cigar, faced the street impatiently, watching the light in the window of their front room. It seemed centuries before it was discreetly lowered.

## CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH THERE IS A TRIVIAL TRAGEDY

**A** FORTNIGHT or so later Hugh woke up from the delirium of the honeymoon and recognised, with the shiver of a surprise, the quaint fact that he was a married man.

The discovery was made, as all such discoveries are made, at breakfast. They were by now settled in the perfect cottage. He was gulping his last cup of tea preparatory to his rush for the ferry-boat, when he looked across the table and saw—his wife. Not the mysterious thing called woman, but the companionable thing called a wife.

Hitherto women had seemed to him beings of a different race, as aloof from him and his masculinity as the stars are from a frog. Strange, wonderful, divine, misty and immeasurable, they existed—if, indeed, he had not dreamed them—in faint, far-off realms towards which his thoughts had yearned and strained yet never reached. And here one of those starry beings was, on the earth beside him, munching toast. Doing it charmingly, too, but still munching. It was marvellous that she should have

fallen so far and yet showed no bruise, no flaw. For the delightful thing was that, though she was here at his hand—he could, and did, lean over and kiss her across the remains of the bacon and eggs—yet her charm remained. True, a different charm, but to his misty dreams this reality was as sunshine to the starlight. He saw her now as a beautiful, companionable, charming part of humanity—not as a different race. Marriage had bridged the chasm that yawned between the sexes. Nay, looking back with clearer gaze, he saw that there was no chasm, there had never been a chasm. All his youth, fed by fiction and the drama, he had pondered on the possibility of bridging that gulf. And really the black chasm was merely the stupefying shadow cast by the novelists and the playwrights. With marriage he had simply stepped over the shadow, and, looking back, found it lying on level land.

And there, across the breakfast-table, with only the wreck of the eggs and bacon between, she, the woman-companion, was more lovable, more desirable than the angel beyond the chasm. She had met him frankly from the other side of sex—and sex had changed a dividing gulf into a highway where they could walk hand in hand.

He found to his astonishment that she, though distinctly and oh, delightfully, a woman, looked at life as he looked at it. The same problems confronted both, and they used the same sort of common sense

in solving them. He saw humanity as one and undivided. More, he felt himself for the first time in his life as one of humanity, part of its steady stream. Hitherto he had rather comforted himself on standing outside that stream, watching it swirling past with amazement and wonder and a little quiet pride. And now he suddenly found himself caught in its current, drifting happily along, hardly caring what its destination was, content as long as it carried her as well as him. And sympathy with the other drifting atoms made him no longer aloofly proud. Their destiny was his; he was part of the big scheme. He had stepped into line, and was happy. He had become part of the great democracy of race.

Yet she was, for all her likeness, delightfully different. Her brain was quicker than his in little things, more reckless, more instinctive—it leapt; and her temperament swung unaccountably from one mood to the next, with breaks in the chain of continuity that momentarily dazzled him. He seemed to be always trying breathlessly to keep up with her lightning pounce.

The big things, the big clumsy things, she left condescendingly to him. While he was still wondering about her, studying her, unconsciously testing her, she had accepted him as her man, stupid, perhaps, and slow in his big, lovable way, but in the large things dependable and safe. She frankly let

him see that she considered him so boyish and simple, sometimes almost, yet charmingly, childish. And she had quickly stripped from him his dear masculine illusion of his own complexity. He had thought himself so different from all other men, as one subtle and fiercely individual. And she had reduced him, in her quick woman's way, to a simple, lovable child. She needed in her conception of him the protecting arms of motherhood to shield him from the world that did not understand, to shield him even from himself that did not understand.

And in this new frankness of speech, this candour of a common view-point, both were happy.

For Nancy had put aside her worries, except in the nights when she woke, first making sure by a gentle touch that he was there in the bed beside her, solid and big and reliable. Then the terror of the future became visible, crushing her. In the daytime, however, busy about the house, bestowing upon it the loving touches that were needed to make it worthy of the baby, she desperately refused to think of any possible catastrophe. The present was crammed full of pleasures and pleasant tasks. The house needed so much attention: there were things to make, meals to cook for him—he had really an absurdly small appetite for so tall a man, and needed to be insidiously fattened.

Hugh had not guessed. His trust in her, his

abysmal ignorance about things that she thought everybody knew, surprised and delighted her. There had been no difficulty in keeping her secret. Fate had let her off with a caution, and she was grateful. Many an unexpected caress that Hugh took as love was merely her gratitude for his blindness.

It was, despite its decorations and its furniture, a comfortable little cottage. The drawing-room, at Nancy's suggestion, was degraded into a study for Hugh. She asserted that she had no need for a drawing-room, while Hugh must have a place for his books. Hugh never guessed that this was the first great renunciation of Nancy. In her heart no place was complete without a drawing-room, carefully dusted every morning, with each cushion and drapery in its invariable place, its mantelpiece arranged with vases in exact symmetrical positions—a place reserved for wet Sunday afternoons. When they could afford a piano it would lord it over its proper domain. She meant to have a piano, though neither of them could play, and Nancy's contralto voice was quite untrained. But she considered a piano solely as an item of furniture, the necessary guarantee of suburban respectability.

Hugh, without a thought of Nancy's sacrifice, grabbed the suggestion. To a bookish man heaven without a library would be the other place. He had gleaned all his knowledge of the world from books, and though his magic spectacles showed him a new



and more marvellous world, he still felt the need of reading.

"Now," said Nancy, "as soon as your library arrives you can go into there and read and write any time you like. You can lock the door, too."

"And what would you be doing?"

"Oh, me? I'd be darning your socks, you silly. And I'll lock you in myself."

"But why?"

"You must finish that novel, mustn't you? And when it's done you'll read it to me, and I'll criticise it."

Hugh had quite forgotten the novel. That evening he got it out and glanced through it. His spectacles showed him that it was "rot." Nancy, married to the author, was not at all like the Nancy he had made his heroine. He saw now that she was a much more interesting person, and altogether charmingly much more human. He had been describing a Harrison-Fisher-Chandler-Christie-Dana-Gibson sort of girl—and he found now that she was too much alive to be pressed flat into a book.

And what was the use of writing about Life when he was actually living it? He saw now why novelists never take their wives for heroines, nor painters their wives for models. This Nancy, his wife, was too wonderful a person, too complex and unprecedented, too astonishing and unexpected, to dissect

for the delight of readers. It seemed an impertinence, and a useless one, to put this charming, pulsing, delightful young woman back into literature. He would have to get another heroine—with a differently coloured hair. The hero, he decided, would do. He was just the sort of person to be a hero—he was so unlike the author.

He chucked the manuscript back into a box, and though Nancy clamoured and prettily pleaded for just one look, he locked the precious “rot” away. Being a husband was quite as big a job as he could tackle.

But his mind went back the next evening to his beloved books, his little library reposing in the boarding-house. He knew they would be well cared for by Mrs. Fitzherbart. But he did not guess how tenderly they were dusted, how reverently arranged, how often inspected by the boarders. Occasionally Miss Catch would pick up a volume, flutter its pages, and put it back with a sigh. She could get no glimpse of the mysteriously vanished Mr. Hugh from it. She went back to the magazines, and pondered the pictures of popular actresses.

Life had indeed been desolate since Hugh's departure. Mrs. Fitzherbart's advertisement for a boarder had attracted one or two males—not very exciting to look at, but certainly in trousers. But each had asked the fatal question, “Any other boarders?” And when they heard the terrible

truth they had hastily departed, promising to let her know. They never did. Women came, too, and asked the same question—not directly, of course, but with the skilled methods of cross-examination gained by a long sojourn in boarding-houses; and they, too, had promised to let her know. So the room lay vacant, peopled, however, by Hugh's library and the tender thoughts of the boarders.

But one night, when the topic of Hugh's departure had become worn threadbare, a knock sounded at the door. Mrs. Fitzherbart arose in agitation.

"That's *his* knock!" she whispered. "Fumbling first, and then determined."

Miss Catch clutched the place where she supposed her heart to be. Really she grabbed too far to the left of her silk blouse; but she knew nothing of anatomy, and on the stage that was where the heroine had always located her heart.

Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, and Miss Littledick held their breath. They were all playing "patience" on the big dining-room table; for the infection had spread from Miss Swatts, and they had got into the habit even of hurrying through dinner in order to get a clear table for their packs of cards.

Mrs. Fitzherbart was right. It was Mr. Hugh's knock—and his wife. He introduced her proudly. Mrs. Fitzherbart wanted to faint, but controlled the impulse, for the news she had to convey to the

dining-room allowed her no time for emotion. She wanted to see the dining-room faint.

"Oh, do come in," she managed to gasp, as she took Nancy's hand.

"We've just come about my books," Hugh hurried to explain, baulking the inspection of the dining-room. "I've got a cottage now, and if you'd kindly send them along, I could do the packing-up myself."

"Come in," Mrs. Fitzherbart insisted, and almost rushed "Mr. Hugh and that woman" into the dining-room. Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, Miss Littledick, and Miss Catch steadied themselves, and though they flushed, they rose and somehow got through the introductions.

"It is nice to see you again," Miss Swatts murmured. "We thought—we thought you'd gone away altogether."

"We're living quite close," said Hugh; and was at once implored for the address.

"And so," said Miss Catch chokingly, "you're married!"

"Oh yes," smiled Hugh, and touched Nancy's hand.

"You must be congratulated, Mrs. Robjohn," murmured Miss Flegg.

"And you," Miss Littledick heroically murmured, with a tired smile at Mr. Hugh.

"Married!" Mrs. Fitzherbart said. "But we haven't seen it in the papers."

"Oh, you wouldn't," said Hugh airily; "we managed it all right with a registrar."

"A registrar! The registry office!"

Consternation fell upon the boarders. But they said nothing further. This must be discussed at length when Mr. Hugh and his registry-office wife had gone.

But Miss Catch had one comment. "You must have missed the orange-wreath," she sighed.

"I did!" said Nancy frankly. It was the first Hugh had ever heard about such an adornment. "And," she graciously added, stricken with a sudden sense of these women being so out of it, "you must all come and see me, when we've settled down."

The hens' trough of happiness was full. They could call on her, and discuss her afterwards! Mrs. Fitzherbart privately determined to find out whether that woman kept Mr. Hugh's socks darned as well as she had done. She pressed the visitors to stay to supper. But Hugh knew those suppers. They left.

The unfinished games of "patience"—several of which were in the most exciting stage, the results hanging in the balance whether the player won or lost her vague bet against herself—were left unregarded. The boarders had things even more important to discuss.

"She's pretty—*horribly* pretty!" said Miss Catch, with desolate candour.

"But her dress!" said Miss Flegg, in her much-trimmed black silk. "I call it indecent—showing her figure like that!"

"She's got a figure to show, anyhow," Miss Swatts said, with a quick glance at Miss Flegg's flatness; "but the cheapness of her gown! Why, we don't keep that stuff in the shop. She must have got it in a sale in the suburbs."

"But she's fascinating, with that red hair," Mrs. Fitzherbart considered. "Though I don't like that untidy way of doing it. My husband always said that if a woman had fascination she could look all right in a dressing-jacket. I never wore them, of course," she added in case of misapprehension. "He always said that I was too fascinating to be a married woman. But sometimes I've thought that that's when a woman wants all her fascination."

Miss Littledick swept her useless litter of cards, that had meant such exciting things half an hour ago, into a neat pack, and stood up.

"I think we're a lot of cats," she announced. "Oh, I know *I* am! The girl's beautiful and attractive and *nice*, and . . ." there was a catch in her over-worked school-teacher's voice—"and we're not!"

The others listened appalled, and the door slammed on Miss Littledick's straight little arid figure.

In the pause that followed that quite unnecessary

slam, Miss Catch looked up. "I think I'll go to bed too." Her eyes were weakly wet. "I've got a headache."

It was really a heart-ache.

The others looked desolately at each other, searching for sympathy, yet afraid, for fear of breaking down, to show it. Then Miss Swatts mechanically tidied up the other unfinished games of "patience," and put the cards carefully away in the drawer in the sideboard.

"I'm going too," she snappily announced. "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" Miss Flegg murmured. "I think a good night's rest will do me good. I can't stand so much excitement."

Mrs. Fitzherbart, left alone, glancing at the clock, was dismayed to find that it was just half-past eight. Well, there was nothing left for her, too, but to go to bed. She reached up to turn out the gas.

"Poor things!" she murmured. "I don't wonder. Of course it's different with me. I've been married. A widow has always got that consolation. Not by a registry office either! But Mr. Hugh! I did think that perhaps Miss Catch might have suited him. We could have had the wedding here. It would have looked so well, and it would have brightened the others up a little. But really there's nothing in Miss Catch. There never is in young

girls like that. Now a widow, a woman of experience, not so old, either . . .” Mrs. Fitzherbart did not continue her thoughts aloud. But her eyes brightened as she stood for a moment silent. She came out of her dream suddenly practical again. “That sort of woman! I’m sure I don’t know why the Lord makes that sort at all. It’s easy to see how she got Mr. Hugh. Men aren’t safe with that sort of hair and that sort of figure—men, single or married. Hubert never was . . . .”

She turned out the gas, locked the front door and crept upstairs.

Going to bed had never been so much a ceremonial at the boarding-house as it was that night. Miss Littledick had made her hurried exit from the conviction that, however hard she wished them back, the tears would have come in another moment.

And though they came in the passage, she dried her eyes and repeated to herself, “I’ve got my children—heaps more than she’ll ever have.”

The only solace for Miss Swatts’ wounded soul was the beneficent thought of the awful shoddy, no matter how cunningly disguised, clothes that the woman wore. But men were blind. Mr. Hugh had never noticed what good stuff Miss Flegg put into her decorous blacks.

Miss Flegg lay limply in her bed for long hours, thinking of her youth, of the days when she was as young as that woman, and when all the world,



to her rapturously dawning interest, seemed an apple-tree to which she had only to reach out her hand to pluck from it the ripest fruit. But, looking back, she recognised that she had never reached out. She had waited, modestly, for the fruit to fall into her lap. Eve was wiser. She plucked the apple. And while Miss Flegg had demurely waited, in a mid-Victorian attitude with downcast eyes, she had not noticed that bolder Eves had rifled the beautiful tree. That girl, too, Miss Flegg was sure, had not waited for the fruit to fall. Mr. Hugh would never have known when to fall. A deliberate, clutching hand, attracted by his ripeness, had stretched forth and grabbed him. It did not seem to Miss Flegg, even now, quite maidenly.

But this is a world, she had found out, which did not help those who did not help themselves. It had taken long, dreary, unfilled years to enlighten her—too late.

In Miss Catch's little room she lay on her bed asking God questions. Why did He make two kinds of women—the one that men wanted, and the other kind, the boarding-house kind? And why did He make Miss Catch the other kind? And what—she turned her reckless little bird's brain on the tremendous problem—what was it that made men like one kind and not the other kind? It wasn't dress, for that was the one question in which she took a supreme interest. It wasn't brightness nor

ability to talk. Miss Catch could talk to a man all day. Was it prettiness? Miss Catch, with recollections of her mirror, dismissed that question with derision. It did not occur to her that there might be magic mirrors as well as magic spectacles. Was it figure? Miss Catch had never seen herself naked—she was always too modest for that, even in the privacy behind a locked bedroom door; but she considered herself as having quite as good a figure as that woman's. Miss Catch was slighter, certainly; the word "thin" was never allowed to enter her thoughts. And she had honestly congratulated herself that her figure was not aggressive. That woman's was. And "curvey." Perhaps that was it. Men demanded curves. Those advertisements in the papers that developed busts in a night, there might be something in them, after all. Her last waking thought was that she would certainly look up those advertisements in the morning. It coldly comforted her.

To you who wear the magic spectacles of matrimony this tragedy of the boarding-house—and of many boarding-houses—may seem trivial. But the realest tragedies are made up of trivialities. It is true that women are made of two kinds, the ones that are wanted and the others that are left—stranded in boarding-houses or as the hard-working, self-sacrificing maiden aunts of many a big family, getting all their fun from the reflection of other's

fun, feverishly interested in the trivial affairs of the family, fiercely championing the family against the world, and mothering all the babies of the family.

Men, too, are made of two kinds; but, failing matrimony, a man has his work. And men do not stay where they are put; they reach out for the things they want; and if they reach out long enough they get the thing—or something like it. That satisfies man. And no matter of what sort a man is, he has usually something beside himself to offer. Position, money—at the least a possible home. And some women will take him for that, and put up with himself. Of course he will never know.

Consider this world-wide trivial tragedy. You see a group of girl children, or school-girls, or university girls, or factory girls, or ballroom girls, and as they stand chatting, laughing, happy in the street of life, you can pick out, as plainly as if they were branded, the ones whom men will want to marry, and the ones whom no man will want to marry. There they are, already sorted.

What is it that sorts them out, brands them? A pretty face, a way of carrying herself, of wearing her clothes, demure eyes, coquetting eyes, quaint eyes, sulky, sleeping lips, laughing lips, pouting lips, a quaint difference in the set of an eyebrow, or the sweep of a chin, the shape of a nose, or the curve of a neck?

Any of these, and still more subtle differences, such as a brain, a manner, a charm, a tact, a pride, a meekness, a strength, a helplessness. Yet, whatever the brand, it is there—to a man.

Looking ahead you can say that this or that girl will be married, or, it may be, seduced; and that this other or that, however much she may desire to be married, or seduced, will never achieve her desire. She may be contented, she may live a full and useful life, she may do good or great work for her generation, but she is debarred from doing the one service she was presumably designed for for the next generation.

It is merely Nature's callous weeding-out process. To get the good mothers is her old, old desire; and, in her crude, blind profusion, she has to make many a woman in order that the best mothers may be chosen. The others serve a useful purpose in Nature's cruel scheme. They stand as a bleak background against which the fortunate, desired, fully-sexed woman stands out for men to mark.

The tragedy is not trivial to the trivial woman.

## CHAPTER XX

### IN WHICH NOTHING HAPPENS

**A**ND now began the suburbanisation of Hugh. To be married is to become suburban. Hugh's interests, that through his books had been world-wide, suddenly coalesced about a little cottage in a Mosman street. Here, indeed, was his world, and a much more interesting and absorbing world than that on which he had locked the little garden gate. His thoughts centred on this strange new planet that had swum into his ken, and he took up his residence upon it.

He left it regretfully in the mornings, with a backward glance at Nancy holding the gate and forbearing to close it—for she had a sense of shutting him out—till, with a final quite undignified wave of the hand, he turned the corner. Then she went in to the loneliness of washing-up the breakfast dishes, and making the beds, and sweeping out rooms that simply wouldn't get dirty, and darning Hugh's dear old socks—she gave each hole in them a kiss, and that was why Hugh so often found so

many of them undarned. But he must have divined the reason, for he never complained.

Yes, he found out that marriage cages a man, but behind bars of gold. And the cage-bird is happiest in his cage.

And Hugh, with a parting wild hope that some day there would be a smaller Hugh to wave his baby hand, too, went to his office, and wondered how she was getting along without him, and daily hoped that she would at last take his advice and cook herself a decent lunch instead of the tea and bread and jam taken sitting uncomfortably on the bare kitchen table.

Woman, left to herself, invariably relapses. The whole elaborate scheme of civilisation, with its fetish of punctuality and its ritual of meals, goes overboard the minute she is left alone in charge. Civilisation is essentially a man-made thing. Woman is much happier, much more comfortable, without it. It may be said, in extenuation, that, discarding the male conception of living, woman has constructed a little feminine world for herself. It is comprised of dress and at-home days, and is presided over by two implacable gods termed Fashion and Society. But the decalogue of Fashion is presented to her by males—certain men-milliners who, for the enrichment of themselves and with the beautiful arrogance of the male, have decided that every month all the civilised women in the world

must discard their outer coverings and buy new ones, slightly different in shape and colour and composition. The more often the dictates of Fashion are promulgated the more profit for the shops. It is an obvious trick, yet, so far, no women in the world except the Hottentots and the Esquimaux have seen through it. So, at the instigation of the cunning Parisian priests of the great god Fashion, all the women of the world are doing an endless quick-change performance. They have got so accustomed to it that they really like it.

And as for that other god, Society, that, too, is man-made. A woman's place in the hierarchy of Society depends on the means or the position her father or her husband gives her.

Yet, take away the male, and woman makes herself supremely happy sitting on the bare kitchen table with a loaf of bread, a pot of tea, and jam.

It was on the prosaic matter of cooking that Hugh's magic glasses were nearly broken. Nothing but Nancy's cooking could have brought home to Hugh the fact that he was married. Nancy, of course, could not cook. Few modern girls of her class can. In their visions of the future, dresses and a house of their own and, by-and-by, the baby, bulk so largely that there is no room for cutlets.

Mrs. Pinkstone had picked up an art that she called cooking. It was an art no more advanced since the first cave-woman singed the still warm

beast at the cave fire. And Nancy had had to work too hard in factories and shops to acquire anything but the rudiments of that palæolithic art of making things sodden and warm.

Hugh, with the male's conviction that cooking comes by nature to the female, had engaged a wife under the impression that every wife became by marriage a born cook. But he is not to blame. I doubt if any lover ever asked his girl if she could grill steak, though doubtless many a girl has volunteered the ancient falsehood.

Of, course, Nancy diligently tried. She bought a recipe book, and came to Hugh, when dinner was later than usual, with anxious enquiries as to what to do next. Hugh put down his book and studied the text-book of cookery through his glasses. But even these did not help him. He discovered that the art of writing recipes was as palæolithic as the art of cooking. He spent many an anxious half-hour, waiting dinner, reducing the proportion of one-tablespoon to ounces avoirdupois; he bought Nancy a pair of scales and a measuring glass, and carefully took the temperature of the gas oven. Nancy heroically tried each new scientific formula, and gave it up. So, sometimes, did Hugh.

The irony of the situation lay in the fact that on first meeting Hugh she had decided that he did not eat enough. He was too splendidly lean, too beautifully spare. And long before she knew she was to



marry him, in her day dreams she had decided that if she ever did marry him she would feed him up. And now his appetite was less than ever.

Then, a month later, Hugh came home to a good dinner, and Nancy confessed. She had spent her afternoons in secret visits to the cooking classes at the Technical College. And thereupon the spectre of divorce, hovering diligently in the scullery, took itself off to the house next door, where another newly married couple had just settled. The wife had been a typiste.

It was the garden that finally fixed the brand of suburbanite upon Nancy and Hugh. Hugh's father had been an aggressive gardener, and in the Melbourne home the boy had been early initiated, under paternal compulsion, into the art of weeding paths. He recalled a secret meeting on a Saturday afternoon with a chosen set of conspirators whose fathers were all gardeners, where they all swore a fearful school-boy oath, with excruciating penalties attached, that if ever they had gardens of their own the only living thing that they would grow would be asphalt.

And now Hugh, the hater of weeding, began to feel the first flush of enthusiasm for tomatoes. Not tomatoes on the table, but tomatoes on the tree. He caught the germ on the Mosman boat. The sole topics of the little groups of men who sat in the stern of the boat smoking their morning pipe were bowls

and tomatoes. In his bachelor days Hugh had sat with his book before him, shutting out as much as possible of the interminable argument about the standard bowl and the perfect tomato. Now he felt his interest in his book flagging. He listened. He began to see that there were subtleties in bowls and allurements in tomatoes.

The result was the purchase of half a dozen plants ; and all that Saturday afternoon and Sunday he and Nancy laboured to make a garden. The tomatoes died long before the place was ready for them ; but in time the bare little plot was transformed into the promise of a lawn and the anticipation of a garden border. Across the lawn he laid out a very wriggly path. He never used that path on week days ; he made a bee-line for the gate. But on Sunday mornings he used to like to loiter along its futile meanderings with Nancy on his arm and the proper air of suburban proprietorship.

When the borders were filled with seedlings and the buffalo grass turf gave signs of untidy growth, Hugh's suburbanisation was complete. On Sunday mornings that secluded street clattered with the noise of innumerable lawn-mowers, and below the hot, tense, metallic shrilling of the cicadas could be heard the cool sibilation of an army of garden hoses.

And Hugh took his place without a thought of shame in that regiment of shirt-sleeved lawn-cutters, while Nancy joined dutifully in the line of the

wobblers of the garden hose. Their happiness and their tameness were complete.

But underneath all this surface happiness ran the current of Nancy's secret. The sinister and muddy stream darkened her naïve joy. Her lapses into a vacant-eyed melancholy puzzled and depressed her husband. Man-like he sought for the reason, and, man-like, found it.

One night, in the little sitting-room, in answer to his shy questionings, she told him. She was going to have a baby.

That was all. She had meant to tell him the truth, but at the mere mention of the coming child his face had so lit up that, hating herself for her cowardice, she dared not kill his joy. After he had got over the first elation she could tell him. She could not go on deceiving him much longer.

And, indeed, Hugh was in no state to learn his disillusion. He felt as if he were the creator of a new universe. (Perhaps he was.) He got up from the edge of her chair, on which he had been sitting, seized her and kissed her with a rapture that was really pride. She made him desist with a hurried, "Be careful, dear!" And in answer to his clumsy surprise, she added, "You must be very gentle with me now."

He was instantly abashed; but in words he made up for his forced abstention from caresses.

It was bound to be a boy, he was sure. And

what a wonderful boy it would be! How he had longed for a son, and what a good time he would give his child!

Nancy had to listen with a set eagerness on her weary face. She would let him get it over and then tell him.

He made elaborate calculations of dates, and at once her fear put her on her guard.

"You never can tell when," she deliberately smiled. "Often they come sooner than they're expected."

"Not sooner than they're wanted!" he crowed.

She could not tell him that night.

Next morning he set forth to the office with a prancing stride, his polished spectacles perched bravely on his lifted nose. He was a king—and could tell nobody of his sovereignty. All that day he was tremendous in his secret arrogance. He felt a fine contempt for the unmarried clerks and the office boy. They were but commoners; he mentally strutted invested with an invisible purple.

His pride, utterly unbased as it was, was no more absurd than that of every other father-to-be. They, too, it might be said, wore magic spectacles. The begetting of a child is one of the commonest incidents in this old wearied world—as many a much-married woman has cause to regret. Yet perhaps the father-to-be, who has no right to his absurd personal arrogance, is suffused with a pride

not his own. When he is in that exalted state he is not his mere mean, unimportant self, but the race. A bigger thing than he has taken possession of his insignificance; in him the newly-winged spirit of the race exults. His soul vibrates to the hymn of the choir of Life. In him the spirit of the race has won a battle, pregnant with tremendous meanings, the augury for an unending triumphal future. The mere man is being used by Life, as the mere soldier is being used by his commander, to carry the standard on.

The immediate result was that Hugh began to take an interest in babies. He discovered that there was a world of interest in babies. He found out that there was a remarkable difference between even small babies, and he felt sure that his baby would be still more different. He understood now a little of the interest Nancy had felt in the baby she had seen when they came to take the cottage. He regretted that he had no very vivid memory of that particular baby. In his masculine ignorance he had put it down as just a baby.

On the tram and boat he covertly scrutinised babies; and if sometimes they smiled at him—it was really at his shining glasses—he smiled back with a delight that communicated itself rapturously to the mother. He was surprised to find, too, how many babies there were in the world. His spectacles disclosed to him a world overflowing with babies.

Certainly, he concluded, the alleged falling-off in the birth-rate was a statistician's fallacy. There was nothing else in the world but babies.

The talks that he and Nancy had about babies—but the unmarried reader may possibly be getting weary.

Now, vaguely, Hugh began to see through his spectacles a change in Nancy's ways. She had lost the lush splendour of her exuberant health; she was often strangely silent, sometimes even irritable, once or twice afraid. He found that he had to comfort her, to soothe her, to strengthen her, to devote himself to her in a way unimagined by him before. She clung to him as if to a staff in the dangerous path she had to travel. She would wake in the night with her dream-fears, and sob her fright into his anxious ears, and at last drop off to sleep with the close, safe feel of his arms about her. And sometimes she would wake in the morning and look at him with her confession in her frank eyes, and refrain. He looked so happy.

Hugh found that he loved her with a strange, new, protecting, infinitely pitying love. He found that love is like a river, for ever changing, for ever broadening. He looked back on it all. First, a sudden welling-up of an unsuspected and hidden spring; then a narrow, impetuous torrent down precipitous valleys, often tossed and swirled aside by barriers of boulders, tarrying a reflective moment

in a pensive backwater, then, with gathered impetus, hurrying triumphantly on ; then as a growing river through shadows and laced sunlight, swollen here and there with new rivulets from distant valleys that added new colours to his love. And at last a noble, broad-bosomed river, brimming through fat river meadows, leisurely taking its winding course, opening up new vistas of loveliness at every turn, broadening and broadening, darkened by passing shadows and disturbed by transient bubbles, carrying along on its broad stream all the debris and the beauty of the world, seizing all the tributaries that flowed to it—no matter how turbulent, no matter how muddy—and making them part of its great purpose, and taking its contemplative way, its memories of rashness and tumult still surviving in unexpected eddies, reflecting on its turbid surface the clean spaces of heaven, to give itself up without a sigh to the placid immensity of the ocean.

So on the current of this quiet, wide, passive, confident love that had come to Hugh their life went on—and still Nancy had not told.

But he began to see more of her soul during these uneventful waiting days. Once, on his return earlier than usual, he found a book, with one leaf turned down, lying on the bed. The turning down of a leaf was to Hugh's scholastic soul the unpardonable sin ; but he lifted glad eyes to the sinner.

"What? *My* girl reading this?" he smiled.

She shamefacedly admitted it.

"But *this*?" It was the very latest and most inscrutable Henry James. "Do you like it?"

"Tell me, Hugh, do *you* understand what it's all about?"

She hung on his answer as if destinies were involved.

"Well," he parried, "not all."

"I'm so glad," she breathed. "I thought I must be dreadfully ignorant. Is it a great book?"

"Yes; it's that. Henry James always is. But you're not the only reader who can't probe all his italicised subtlety and his sublime use of slang. And you've got half-way through it?"

"I thought I had better hang on."

"But what made you read it?"

"Because . . . because, Hugh dear, I'm so ignorant, so beneath you."

"Beneath *me*?" Hugh gasped.

"Yes, I am." She hurried it over. "I'm not the wife for you. And—and with the baby, I do so want him to be like you, to like good books; and I'm frightened he won't. So I'm reading them—for him."

"Pretty hard luck to start the kiddie on Henry James." Hugh laughed, with a new tenderness in his eyes.

"It all began that night you brought that man home



to dinner," she went on, radiant beneath his love-look. "After dinner you talked with him for hours and hours about books. Nothing but books. And I had to sit and sew and pretend I was happy. But I wasn't. I was sulky. I hated you, because when you talked of books you forgot me. I was jealous of that man, horribly jealous. I saw that there was one side of you that I had never even touched. I felt that I had been shut out—or, rather, that I had never even knocked at that closed door. I could have torn up every book in that bookcase; and, in the morning, when you had gone, I went and looked at them, and hated them. I nearly made a wreck of the shelves; but then I thought of the baby, and I took hold of myself—for him. And then I took up one of the books, just to see what my rival was really like, and dipped into it."

"What was it?"

"'Diana of the Crossways,' and the first chapter! I struggled through it, but I didn't understand it a bit."

"Poor child," he smiled. "So you didn't read on?"

"Not till I'd read that first chapter through three times—and even then I wasn't sure that the man who wrote it knew what he was writing about. But the story was fine. I loved the quiet man. I thought he was so like you."

"I thought you liked something more romantic."

"So I do, dear. But I went on. I started at the beginning of the top shelf, and I've read two and a half shelves."

He had to reward her for that.

Then he smiled. "Lucky that you didn't start on the economics shelf."

"Oh, I'll get there in time. So now that you know, dearest, you must talk to me of books and books and books. The boy is going to be so fond of books."

So began a new mutual interest; and Hugh found in her a new aptness of inquiry, a quick appreciation that perhaps surprised him. She was so quick at anticipating him. She had studied him so intently that gradually she had got to feel in some matters more intensely than he.

One day she surprised him by suggesting that the lurid friezes that clamoured from their walls were not absolutely necessary to home comfort. She persuaded him to get the emphatic wall-paper covered with an unpatterned paper of quieter hue, and went with him to choose it. At the paper-hangers she invariably made her choice a second before Hugh did—and in every case her choice lit on the very paper that he wanted. He did not notice that in every case her eyes were watching his face, not the paper. The interest in his eyes told her which to choose. He was surprised and delighted, and charmingly fooled. But perhaps his

taste was slowly undermining hers. By choosing what he liked she gradually got to like it. He noted, for instance, that her preference for the gaudy, so strikingly displayed in her dress, had grown much subdued. She said to him in excuse that now that she was married, and going out so seldom, she must dress more quietly. And there was another reason that she did not need to tell him.

The home, too, was gradually taking on a quieter tone. The fiery brass bedstead gave way to a straight, unpainted wooden one; the spindly chairs disappeared and were replaced by something more simple and solid. Even the imitation marble mantelpieces—nice wood smeared with ragged threads of gaudy colours by a painstaking artist who, it seems inconceivable, made a living out of this debauchery—even these were calmed down beneath a coat of dull green paint.

And when Hugh vaguely noted this new restfulness of his rooms Nancy always said, "It's for the little chap. I do so want him to like the things you like."

## CHAPTER XXI

## IN WHICH THE DOCTOR IS CALLED

IN those months Hugh felt drawn ever and ever closer to Nancy. They took to counting the months, and Nancy let him go on counting wrongly. Sometimes, almost sure of his love for her, almost sure that it would survive the shock of her disclosure, she made up her mind to tell him. But then always came the thought of her child. He might forgive her, she might make him forgive her, but could he forgive the child? In her mother-love she even feared he might kill the baby. And then, when she had conquered this obsession, Hugh would say something to show that she could not tell—yet.

“*Our* child!” he would say over and over. “How it will bind us together! Fancy *me* with a child!”

“And me!” she would bravely laugh.

“Oh, you!” he would say in his husband manner. “It’s mine!”

Then she made one of those intimate little married jokes that can never be repeated outside the bedroom.

"I'll be dreadfully disappointed if he hasn't brown eyes like mine," he would say.

"Why not like mine, yellow?"

"Amber! Amber and honey and gold! No, they're too wonderful to waste on a boy; but if it's a girl—oh, she *must* have your eyes. But it couldn't be a girl, could it?"

She agreed with him that it could not. She prayed in her heart bitterly that it would not be. A girl—like her! Deceptive and weak and false! To grow up and marry a good man, and have him idolise her, and put her on a distant pedestal, and make no allowances!

"But perhaps he won't be a bit like you at all," she urged. "I've heard of cases where they were not a bit like either father or mother. Why, I read in that big blue book about guinea-pigs——"

"Mendelism?" he smiled. "So the little woman has been studying Mendel and heredity! He *is* to be such a learned little chap. We'll make him a Rhodes scholar."

She saw it was hopeless. But some day soon she must tell.

The news had flown through the street. Wireless messages were passed from front garden to front garden that Mrs. Robjohn "expected" in December. And the neighbours came to call and to inspect the silly little garments she was so happily busy making.

With that disregard for distance or ostensible means of communication characteristic in these feminine disturbances the message reached Hugh's old boarding-house. Mrs. Fitzherbart came to call.

When that huge lady got back to her flock of ewe-lambs she found them assembled, waiting with breathless interest for the report.

"She 'expects' in two months," she announced.

Every woman did a feat of marvellous mental arithmetic. They reached the answer simultaneously.

"Just nine months!"

Then followed a musing pause, with many thoughts unspoken.

A thunderbolt fell. It was Mrs. Fitzherbart's portentous, "But . . ." She gave them the dramatic suspense of her grim pause. "But, from her condition, I should say—in fact, from my experience as a married woman, I'm sure of it—the baby will be here much sooner!"

"You mean——!" Miss Swatts gasped, horror-stricken.

Mrs. Fitzherbart nodded grimly. The verdict had been given.

"I should say that it's more like two weeks than two months," she added.

"The cat!" Miss Flegg almost screamed.

"She *made* him marry her," Miss Catch piteously whispered. "Oh, if I'd only known ——!" Her

inert soul flamed up into revolt. "So that's how she got him! If *I'd* only——"

But she did not finish—it was too terrible a thought. But into her maiden mind the rude, tempestuous thought had come. She shuddered at this revelation of the depravity of woman—and herself.

"Our poor Mr. Hugh," sighed Miss Littledick. And then, with a larger thought, "Poor things, both of them."

"Why, why didn't we look after him better?" Miss Swatts wailed. "If we'd only been kinder to him, kept him at home in the evenings, he'd never have gone after other women."

"If you're meaning, Miss Swatts"—Mrs. Fitzherbert haughtily swelled her already ample chest—"that I've not made my house a home for a single man, then you're saying what isn't true, Miss Swatts. I'm sure I've done my best. I've been a mother to him, that I have, Miss Swatts, and you know it."

It took Miss Swatts and the combined efforts of the others quite a time to reduce that offended chest to its proper proportions.

"It's a dreadful thing to happen to a man," Miss Swatts resumed. "The things a woman—no, we can't call her a woman—the things a creature will do nowadays to get a man. I'm glad that in my days——"

"Oh, I don't know," Miss Catch said hopelessly.

"I think now that if there was a man I wanted I'd do the same."

The others stared incredulously at the snake in their garden. The snake looked at that moment like a worm, with the conviction that it was quite time to turn, if she only knew the right way to do it. The others decided that the poor thing did not know what she was saying. A pitying look passed between the others, a look which said, "There! I knew she loved him all the time!"

"Only," Miss Catch lamely concluded, "I know I'd never. I haven't the pluck."

"Well"—Miss Flegg absolved her and returned to the main question—"the thing's done now. She's got him. That's all."

"No"—Miss Littledick raised her thin, metallic voice—"it's not all. The great thing is that they are safely married. We ought to be glad, for Mr. Hugh's sake—for both of their sakes—that nobody'll know."

"Oh, won't they?" said Mrs. Fitzherbart. "People will talk." By "people" she meant herself.

"I've known cases when the baby came as early as that."

"Yes," Mrs. Fitzherbart countered; "and I've known cases when what they called a seven-months' baby looked like a nine-months' child."

"Of course we can't help people talking," Miss



Littledick returned to the charge. She spoke pointedly, for she distrusted the landlady. "But this wasn't a church marriage. It wasn't in the marriage notices. We're the only people who really know. Nobody else would be able to find it out even if they suspect, which they've no reason to, And," she appealed to the others with a confidence she did not feel, "*we* won't let on."

"No—no," Miss Swatts said doubtfully.

"It wouldn't be fair, it wouldn't be nice, to our Mr. Hugh," the little school-teacher earnestly urged.

"But why should he protect her?" said Miss Flegg vindictively.

"Because she's his wife."

"But that's just what we can't ever forgive," Miss Catch wailed, coming out of her awed contemplation of her bird-soul in revolt.

"We've got to—now that she's Mrs. Robjohn," Miss Littledick said pertinaciously. "It's for him, Mr. Hugh, I'm pleading."

"Pity you didn't marry him yourself," Mrs. Fitzherbart, seeing her occupation gone, savagely snapped.

"I never tried to," Miss Littledick said simply. "He never looked at me." Then fiercely, "And I never tried to make him, which is more than I can say for some people with their new blouses."

"Meaning me?" snarled Miss Catch.

Miss Littledick pulled up. "No, dear," she said, leaning across the table and kissing the fuming little wisp of resentment that looked like an angry rabbit, "if *I* had a figure I'd only be too glad to think of dressing it smartly ; but I'm like a clothes-prop."

Miss Catch was mollified. She really found it difficult to get angry with anyone ; and Miss Littledick was so useful in buttoning up the backs of those wonderful blouses.

Miss Littledick looked round the big table. "So we've all decided, for the sake of Mr. Hugh, that we won't say a word ?" she made her final appeal.

"Of course, of course," the others capitulated.

Miss Littledick drew a long breath. "Then," she summed it up, "I'll have to get those pilchers finished at once."

"Yes ; and I haven't got that baby's bonnet half-embroidered," said Miss Catch.

Miss Swatts chimed in. "There's that petticoat only just started. I'll get on with it this evening. I do hope it's a boy."

"Like Mr. Hugh," Miss Catch manfully smiled. "It's a boy's bonnet I'm making, anyway."

Apparently the difference of sex is to be seen in a new-born baby's bonnet.

"That settles it," Mrs. Fitzherbart smiled. "And the poor thing will need a lot of advice. I'll run over in the morning."

Henceforth the boarding-house had a tangible peg upon which to hang their interminable pre-occupations about babies. They were really going to have one themselves !

There was probably more joy in the boarding-house than in the cottage. Hugh, finding Nancy sometimes in tears, and often catching an appealing look in her eyes such as that of a child when it does not know why it is punished, began to be affected with Nancy's fears. He could not bear to leave her long ; and his attendance at the office was shortened in a way that more than once brought down upon him the disapproval of his superiors.

One day, despite the warning he had received the previous day, he decided to go home by the four o'clock boat. That morning, as he kissed Nancy good-bye, he had seen the tears welling in her eyes. But he had had to run for the boat.

It happened that that afternoon chance brought Bill back into Nancy's life. But the Bill of this period was a much deteriorated Bill. After the rejection of Nancy's offer he had made the mistake of getting sorry for himself, with alcoholic assistance. He was arrested in a maudlin state ; but when he faced the magistrate in the morning he learned that, in his sorrow for himself, he had blacked a policeman's eye, and—what in the eyes of the magistrate was a much more terrible offence—had torn the sacred uniform of the law, damaging

it to the extent of 3s. 4d. The ultimate consequence of this undesirable fame was that Bill lost his job. Then, finding that jobs for a youth trained only to add up accounts and take charge of the petty cash are not easy to get, he decided that it was nobler to stay at home and live on his mother. In short, Bill, not having the fibre of a man in him, and thrown out of his stride, had gradually drifted to the level of the intermittent loafer.

Under his mother's nagging, emphasised at last by her refusal to let him have money for his daily alcohol, he tried his hand at odd jobs. He found that posing as a gardener not only brought in the small amount of money necessary to slake his thirst, but occasionally provided him with a good dinner. He was, of course, without any knowledge of gardening; but he found that any suburban wife would usually take an incompetent man for a day's work as long as he was cheap.

Bill was returning from a half-day's work (with dinner) when he decided to prospect the street in which Hugh lived. Its newness promised the sort of employer he desired—the young wife who could be prompted by the prospect of a renovated front garden for the new husband on his return home. Bill had found that older wives had not that ambition. Luckily he was never present when the new husband returned.

Bill explored the front gardens carefully as he

passed, with a cautious scrutiny of any woman he saw on the verandahs. So much depended on the type of employer.

It was thus that he scrutinised Nancy. Her hair first attracted his attention, and then he recognised her. She was sitting on the little verandah, gazing vacantly out on the street.

Fortified by the drinks he had had on his way, he opened the gate and approached her. A great scheme had sprung complete in his excited brain.

"So it's you, Nancy!" he said with a cunning smile. "So snug in this little cottage!"

"You, Bill!" she cried, with an effort putting sight into her blank eyes.

"Yes, me. So you're married all right, eh?" His coarse eyes swept her figure, and she flushed. "And going to have a baby!"

"Yes," she said hurriedly, disgusted.

He flamed at her contemptuous look.

"*Whose* baby?" He leaned to her.

"Mine!" she cried, rising in her defence.

"And mine!" He came nearer. "And I suppose your toff husband don't know?"

She lost her control. "Bill," she appealed, "you wouldn't——?"

"Oh, wouldn't I?" he sneered, satisfied at the easy way it had turned out. Then his self-pity swept him. He contrasted himself, an honest, decent chap thrown out of work, with her, a bad

woman, living in luxury. "Here am I, chucked out of my job through no fault of mine, and starving!"

"Oh, Bill," she said, a flood of old memories sweeping her, "I'm sorry. "I could get you a meal—and some money."

"That's it," he said, his face clearing. "You're quick enough, Nancy—always were. You've got to keep me now. How much money have you got?"

"Me? Only a few shillings."

"I'll take it—to go on with. But," he thrust his face in hers, "it'll have to be more than that if I'm going to keep my mouth shut, see?"

"But it's all I've got."

"You'll have to get it from the toff you fooled. I want—let me see—I want a pound a week—regular."

"Bill!" Her horror-stricken eyes stared at him, and suddenly her hand went convulsively to her heart, and her face twitched. "You"—she gasped for breath—"you couldn't do that!"

"Couldn't I? If you don't promise to have it for me by Monday, I'll wait here till your bloke comes, and tell him."

"And if I promise you the money?"

"I'll not say a word. He can think the kid's his—and he's welcome to it."

Her hand went again to her heart, and with the other she steadied herself against the wall.

"No," she cried, "I'll not do it! Tell him—I

*want* you to tell him. I'm sick of it all; and he's so good. I'm sick . . . sick . . . .” She sank against the door-post. “I'm ill!”

“Not much!” said Bill brutally. “You don't get out of it like that. I'll have all the cash you've got in the house first, anyway.”

He pushed her aside, but she struggled with him, preventing him entering the open door. But she knew that it was useless. Yet she fought, with some vague intention of preserving her little home from the contamination of Bill's presence.

The little gate clicked, and Hugh came striding across the grass plot. He picked up the intruder and hurled him off the verandah.

Then he held Nancy close in his arms, and watched the man pick himself up and limp to the street. He felt Nancy tremble all through her body.

“What is it, Nance?” he cried in agony. “What's that drunk doing here? It's that chap Bill, isn't it? Has he hurt you?”

She looked up to her husband, a strange frightened look in her wide eyes.

“Hugh!” she whispered tersely. “Ring up for the doctor and the nurse—at once!”

## CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH HUGH'S GLASSES ARE MERCIFUL

THE bustling little nurse took charge the moment she arrived.

"Didn't expect it so soon," she said cheerfully, as she came from the bedroom. "But she's going on nicely."

"She's had a shock—a drunken man tried to get into the house, I think," Hugh explained.

The nurse looked at him quietly, and Hugh was vaguely annoyed at what looked like disbelief in her honest eyes. She seemed about to say something, but all she said was,

"Ring up the doctor, and tell him there's no immediate hurry. Tell him to be here in a couple of hours' time."

"Hadn't he better come at once?" he asked anxiously. "I'd feel safer."

"Every husband says that." The youthful nurse smiled from the depths of her vast experience. "But the doctor will be mad if you get him too soon."

On his return from the house with the telephone



next door Hugh was prevented by the nurse from entering the bedroom. He fiercely resented being sent away. The nurse's infantile smile was adamantine.

Hugh paced the next room, trying to shut his ears to the horror that he felt sure was being enacted in the bedroom. His last sight of Nancy had shaken him. In her agony she had pushed him away from her. He had said, "Don't you want me to hold you, dearest?" and she had shut her lips and flung him off.

And now her groans shook him terribly. He felt helpless, useless, and callously to blame. It was a terrible business, this bringing a child into the world. If he had only known! He could not stand her cries. He left the house and paced up and down the street, passing and repassing the lit cottage, afraid to go in, and yet terrified to go out of sight of the gate.

The doctor came at last, and after what seemed to Hugh an hour of suspense, the doctor came from the bedroom.

"Everything's going fine," the doctor said cheerfully, yet with a weary look in his eyes. "This makes the third case of this kind I've had to-night. It won't be for some hours yet."

And even as he was seating himself heavily in the sitting-room the nurse cried "Doctor!" down the passage. The doctor lumbered hastily out of

the room. Hugh had noted his white face as he fled. And there was a note of fear in the nurse's call.

It seemed an eternity before the doctor returned. His words were curt.

"There's a complication—a serious one. You must telephone another doctor at once."

He gave Hugh three telephone numbers, and rushed back to the bedroom.

Hugh, with a cold fear in his heart, remembered saying to himself, "You must pull yourself together!" as he ran to the telephone. He got the first doctor on the list and rushed back.

"He'll be here in ten minutes."

"H'm. That'll do. It's serious. . . ." And he was gone to the kitchen for his instruments, already being sterilised in boiling water.

Hugh hovered, a prey to terror. And then again he told himself to take hold of himself. He mustn't break down. He deliberately sat down and strove to think. The only thing he could do was to go outside and wait for the other doctor. He might not know the house.

Out in the cool air thought came back to him.

"If Nancy dies!" he muttered, and stared aghast. It was the end of the world for him. He looked down the deserted street, with its one futile lamp challenging the darkness. And then he saw the steady, aloof, hostile stars. "You devils!" he cried. "What do *you* care?"

The thought of prayer came into his tormented mind. But he did not know what or whom to pray to. And then the serene, mindless reproof of those distant onlookers steadied him. It did not matter to them. They went on with their work, careless of results, content with their work. Well, he too must go on. Life was like that. He must not give way. That was foolish and human. He must stiffen himself against every blow. Yet his weak, tormented heart cried out for something upon which he could cast his wearied burden. And then the thought of his dead mother rose up. He became a child again. Now he felt, as never before, the clamant need of her close comfort. But she was dead—and Nancy would die too.

The soul of the man, unconquerable, rose in him. He would not give in. He might be called on any moment to do some task. He must pull himself together. In his mind he saw the black box coming clumsily out of the gate. It would never get through . . . the gate was too narrow.

The doctor's motor snorted up to him, and Hugh, glad to feel that he was of the slightest use, led the way inside.

He waited in the passage, striving not to hear the murmur of quick question and answer inside.

The other doctor came out. "We must start at once. It's the only chance," he said on his way to the kitchen.

"Will she . . . get over it, doctor?" Hugh flung at his back.

"There's a good chance, but I can't say about the child. If it's a case of her or the child, of course——?"

"Save Nancy—only save Nancy! Don't worry about the child!"

The doctor nodded, and swiftly re-entered the bedroom.

Hugh had so wanted a child, and now he was surprised to find how little the child, the sole topic of their lives for months past, mattered. The child or Nancy? He laughed hysterically at the doctor even suggesting any other alternative. As if there could be a choice!

It was soon afterwards that Hugh looked up and found the second doctor bending over him in the sitting-room.

"She's getting on very nicely," he announced.

Hugh leapt to his feet. "You're sure, doctor you're sure?"

"Yes; she's unconscious yet; but everything is all right—as far as we can see at present."

In his relief Hugh sank back trembling. He found that physically he was unable to stand. He wondered why the doctor did not go. And then a thought came. He had not heard the child cry.

The doctor saw the thought in Hugh's eyes.

"The child . . ." he began.

Hugh knew. "That doesn't matter," he said.

"It was one or the other," the doctor said, and hurried back to the sick-room.

After the doctors had gone, towards morning, the nurse told Hugh that he could see his wife. The room was strangely white and dreadfully tidy, like the altar of a cathedral, and she—that white, unconscious figure in the white bed—that was Nancy, his wife. He leant over her reverently and whispered her name. And she, in her drowse, turned her face towards his, with pursed lips, for his kiss. Her mouth was sickly odorous with chloroform, and her frail hand feebly groped at the sheets. She was feeling for the warmth of her babe.

The nurse went silently to a sheeted corner of the room and brought a tiny burden. She gently uncovered a corner of it, and Hugh saw through his glasses the face of his child. They were merciful glasses that night.

"It's a boy," the nurse whispered, with a break in her voice. "A beautiful boy. The pity of it, the darling!" She kissed the tiny, cold face.

A boy! Hugh had never thought to ask. And his! His glasses traced a resemblance to an early photograph of himself.

The nurse took her little dead burden away, and gently ordered Hugh out of the room.

In the dawn he was allowed in again. In the

grey light he saw Nancy sleeping quietly, and another head—a tiny head, beside her. Nancy's unconscious hand was touching it gently, caressing it with little yearning kisses of her fingers. Hugh almost thought he saw it stir. It *did* stir! He turned quickly to the nurse, but she, with a sharp look, shook her head. Hugh looked long at the babe, and acquiesced.

"She was so restless that I had to bring it to her," the nurse whispered. "It seemed to quieten her at once."

"I would like her to see it before——"

"No," said the nurse. "Better tell her it's all right, but that the doctor won't let her see it till she's stronger."

"It will kill her—Nance!" said Hugh, the tears in his eyes.

And then Nancy waked, and looked up at Hugh, smiling vacantly. He bent and kissed her.

She remembered. "The baby?" she asked.

The nurse had swiftly covered up the little head.

"It's a boy," said Hugh.

"I'm so glad," Nancy said, and instantly was asleep again.

The nurse quickly took the child away.

An hour later Nancy waked again. "I want to see my boy," she asked.

"You can't just yet," Hugh said. "You're too weak."

A sudden suspicion froze her eyes. "I can't hear it crying," she whispered. "Is it . . . ? It's dead! I know it's dead. I felt it cold beside me. It's dead!"

Hugh could not deceive her. "Yes," he said, and shrank from the horror he seemed to see in her eyes.

But, instead, an incredible relief flowed into them. She sought his eyes, and "Oh, Hugh, how hard it must be for you!" she whispered.

He saw in her gaze only her pitying comfort for him, and was humbled at so great a love that, putting aside her mother-yearnings, had thought only for his hurt.

"Could I?" she said at last; and the nurse brought the little child.

Nancy looked at its wee face long, searching, searching.

"Isn't it like me?" said Hugh pitifully.

Nancy said slowly, "I knew it would be;" and then the nurse saw the look in Nancy's eyes for which she had waited, it seemed to her, so long. The nurse gave the child to its mother, and led Hugh away.

That mother-love, so late awakened, so swiftly killed, so passionate, so useless, was not for other eyes to see.

At breakfast time the doctor came again, made his examination, and told Hugh that, though not

out of danger, his wife had every chance of recovery.

"If only she gets over it," said Hugh, "she must never go through anything like this again."

The doctor smiled. "Oh, you needn't fear. This sort of thing never recurs. It's only at the first."

"No, no; we must never have a child now."

"By-and-by," the doctor smiled reassuringly from the depths of his larger knowledge of life.



## CHAPTER XXIII

## IN WHICH HUGH SEES CLEAR

**D**URING the long days of Nancy's slow convalescence Hugh was much with his wife. For she did not get well quickly. The wise young nurse explained it in many ways, all except the true one—that her body needed the dead child. But husband and wife found that their loss drew them together in a way that, it seemed to them in their ignorance, no living baby would have done. Each felt that in the other was all that was left of a wrecked world. And the perilous nearness of the destruction of their world left them infinitely grateful.

The boarding-house people came to call the first day Nancy was allowed to receive visitors. And the new Nancy smiled to herself at the way she had misinterpreted Miss Swatts, Miss Flegg, Miss Littledick, Miss Catch, and Mrs. Fitzherbart. These dear women—cats? Why, they were all sympathy, all kindliness. For they saw in Nancy not the woman who, by the grossest treachery to

their sex, had stolen Mr. Hugh from them, but only a woman like themselves, defrauded like themselves of their priceless heritage, cruelly bereft of their child. The loss of her baby put them all on the same plane. They were all women. God was unfair, but His unfairness was not kept for one sort of woman only. They had all the sympathy of a common loss: in the shock of the great calamity they were sisters.

And when Nancy told Miss Littledick that the doctor had said that by-and-by she need not have any fear about having another child, that thin little acrid woman leant over the bed and kissed Nancy. It was the first time in her life, since her childhood, that she had kissed anybody except children.

And off she trotted to tell her great news to the jubilant and excited boarding-house. And they all went up to their rooms and took out the little unfinished garments, and rejoiced that some day they would be of use.

And slowly Nancy grew well, and they could venture to talk of the child. But one Sunday morning Hugh found Nancy fingering the little white clothes she had lingered so long over making.

"I was just looking them over before I burnt them," she said bravely.

Hugh smiled triumphantly in her face. "You silly! Burn them—after all the lovely hours you've spent over them? Put them away carefully. You

never know. Somebody else might have a baby, and they'd come in useful. Or. . . ."

His look told her.

It was about this time that Hugh began to be dissatisfied with his spectacles. They seemed to tire his eyes, or perhaps it was that he had overstrained his vision in reading to Nancy at night. Whatever the cause, there was no doubt that sometimes a slight blur, strangely reminiscent of the old days, came over his field of vision. Slight headaches made their presence known. Puzzled and depressed, he decided to see the specialist again.

"Yes," said the specialist, "your eyes are all right, but you're badly run down in health. The whole system is out of gear. Been overworking, or had a shock?"

Hugh told him of Nancy's illness. The specialist nodded.

"The glasses are all right, but you're run down; and the eyes are naturally the first to show symptoms. The eyes want a rest. You must go away for a month to the country, and leave your books behind."

Hugh refused.

"Then I'll have to give you a change of spectacles for a few months—and a tonic. That'll put you right; and then, say, in three months' time, you could take to your old spectacles again. Let me look at them again."

He examined the magic glasses.

"Curious! They seem—different. They glitter so."

He tried them on his little nose.

"Curious!" he muttered again. "I seem to see better with these than with my own. Yet my astigmatism is quite different to yours. There's a clarity, a brightness about things—I might almost say a rosiness—that I've certainly not noticed before. I feel brighter, happier, more in touch with the world. And they suit my vision just as well—no, better than my own spectacles."

He paused, puzzled; then his professional equipment came to his rescue. He sought and found the reason for this strange rosiness of outlook.

"Ah, I tried a fruit breakfast this morning. No meat! That explains it. Wonderful! I'll write a thesis on fruit breakfasts in their relation to astigmatism for the medical society."

He handed the magic glasses back, satisfied; but, as he replaced his own glasses on his neat nose, a sense of disquiet came into his eyes.

"I'm not so sure that fruit breakfasts are quite satisfying enough. I don't feel so—so rosy. Yet certainly there must be something in giving up meat."

And when the specialist went home that evening, there must have been some of that rosiness yet

about him. He looked at his wife—he had been married fourteen years—and saw her beautiful.

Hugh went to the magic optician's shop—and was delighted to find that it was still there.

He descended the three obscure steps and found the little optician—the wonderful optician who made a living by manufacturing a rosy aspect of things.

It did not take the magician long to provide the new glasses. He had them in stock. Hugh, expecting new revelations, eagerly put them on.

Yes, he could see more clearly. The fine little lines at the edge of the optician's eyes seemed as if etched on his round face; and his bent, bald head, lit by an overhead electric light, shone like a planet seen through a telescope. Everything started out sharply from its background. The shop looked like a scene-painting on the stage—or, rather, like an excellent stereoscopic view.

He could see quite clearly. In fact, as the hard reality of Hugh's new vision was bitten into him, the chill thought dismayed him that he could see too clearly. He had so long been accustomed to his magic glasses that this brilliant crudeness of unblinking reality hurt him. Even the magician of the spectacles turned out to be an insignificant, commonplace shopkeeper. There was not a suggestion of a gnome about him. What had happened?

He paid the optician, and saw a greedy look in the shopman's eye as he picked up the gold, dubiously clinked it on the counter, and swept it into the till.

Up the three dizzy steps into the prosaic street Hugh went sadly. Faces went past him—hard, cruel, business faces. He looked in vain for the hidden romance that lurked behind their eyes. The street was hard, matter-of-fact. It was merely a line of shops and offices where spiders lurked for wary, disillusioned flies. The telegraph wires were the spiders' webs. He met a policeman. That policeman was but a policeman. It was a staggering blow.

He made his way to the quay. It was filled with rudely hurrying men and women, rushing for boats, the men feverishly buying papers, the women burdened with parcels. He saw not one girl that he could call pretty. The bloom of womanhood was lost in the undignified haste, the preoccupation with squalid affairs.

The ferry-boat was no bouquet of perfumed romance. He had to reach it through a crush of human-kind, buffeted and hustled as he struggled across the narrow plank. The packed boat cut the steel-grey waters with a matter-of-fact swiftness. The whistle brayed in his sensitive ears. The people about him, sitting too close to him for comfort, were obviously suburban, engrossed in their papers

or talking inanities about cricket matches or tomatoes.

A child that ran up to him from the opposite seat and loudly and confidently called him "Daddy" made him flush with annoyance. He inwardly raged that dirty brats should be allowed loose on ferry-boats. They should be gagged and hobbled. This one was dirty-faced too, and its sticky fingers soiled his trouser-leg. He pushed it off, and its mother, putting him down as a bachelor, indignantly reclaimed it. He never did like children.

On his way home he passed his old boarding house. It deliberately looked like a boarding-house.

And Nancy, as he entered what his new glasses showed him to be a commonplace cottage in a street of commonplace cottages, looked to him like. . .

He could not phrase it, but the shock of this strange Nancy staggered him. He saw her—for the first time in his life—with a damnable clearness. He saw her as she was.

She saw the new look in his eyes—the look she had so long feared to see; and instantly the conviction came to her that someone—Bill, most probably—had told him the truth. He knew!

But Hugh, seeing no longer the dream-Nancy of his imagination, seeing her real and earthly and human, seeing her merely as one of his own race, had a sudden illumination which certainly did not

come from his new spectacles. They were to blame. They distorted things—like those deceptive curved looking-glasses he had once seen at a show.

He hurriedly pulled the detestable things off, fixed his magic spectacles on his nose, and, trembling with anxiety, looked at her again. Thank God it was his Nancy!

"You looked so—so different through those new glasses of mine—I can't be used to them yet—that I . . . I hardly knew you," he said, and hurriedly kissed her.

Her sudden relief was too great for her. She lost control of her tongue.

"Oh, Hugh, when you looked at me like that I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" His blank gaze sobered her. She hid her tell-tale face on his arm.

But she had seen that look. It had come at last. The fear had taken form. It would come again and again. Someone would tell him, and then . . . ! No, she could not go on living with that possibility ever before her. She wavered. The baby was dead, her sin had been expiated. He would forgive her . . . perhaps. Yet she wavered.

"The baby," she said weakly, with averted head. "It died."

"Dearest," he comforted her, "that couldn't be helped. You mustn't blame yourself for that. The doctor told me before. It was a question of your



life or his; and I chose. I am to blame alone. And I am so glad it was given me to make the decision. For it's only you, my wife, I want."

He felt her arms tighten on him, but she said nothing.

"But if we had been allowed to keep the little chap—how happy we would have been! How I wanted him! How we used to talk about him, and build up hopes for him; how we meant to watch him grow into a great, brave man—our child! And now . . ."

She wavered no longer. She saw that, at any cost, she would have to tell him the truth. She realised now, as she had vaguely divined every time she spoke of the dead child, how much of Hugh had been buried with the baby. She saw the vague pain in his lean face, the rare, difficult smile, the long struggle to buoy her up and never let her know his loss. She must tell him that his grief was wasted, that his silent sorrow should be thankfulness. She was tired of it all. She could not go on living like this, with his immense trust in her and her tremendous deceit. That sin had ever separated them—an unsheathed sword in the bed between them. The look of his had shown her the truth. They could never be all in all to each other until the falseness on which his love had been built was cast out of their vain Eden. God had forgiven her, had wiped out her sin, had slain the baby that separated

them. Surely he, her husband, would forgive? And then they could begin a new life, serene in their knowledge of each other, sure of the broad-based future.

The yearning heart broke down the barriers she had built round her life. She looked bravely up.

"The babe," she said. "I wanted it to die."

His blank spectacles gave him no clue, no warning.

"Yes, Hugh," she hurried on. "God knew. He took pity on me. He let me off."

He listened, not understanding. She saw how hard it would be to make him understand. She knew she was undermining his whole conception of her.

"The babe wasn't yours, Hugh . . . Yes, I've been bad. But when I married you I did not know."

She felt him stiffen as against a blow. His mouth gaped. His spectacles stared blindly.

"And then you went away to Melbourne, and then—only then, dear—I found out. And I tried to give you up, to go away with . . . with its father. That was all true I wrote. I never thought I would see you again when I posted that letter. But he wouldn't have me. And you came back, and I hadn't had the courage to drown myself—because I would be killing my child. And so I was weak, and I let you take me. And I thought I could tell you—long ago—and perhaps you would forgive me."

Her voice trailed away as she raised her eyes and saw his glasses staring horror at her. He pushed her from him.

"I . . . I can't see you, Nancy!" he cried. "There's a blur before my eyes. I can't see you. I can only see . . . . ."

His groping hand plucked at the air before her face, as if to tear away a veil.

"These glasses!" he muttered, and picked them off.

Then mechanically he pulled the new glasses from their case, and put them on, and looked at his wife. He saw clear.

"It was Bill?" he said curtly.

She nodded wearily. "Dearest," she said, and would have clung to him; but he was a pillar of stone, rigid and cold, as if in death. So, with lowered eyes, she went on.

"It was when I thought you had done with me. I thought it was all over between us—all over when you did not even know that it had begun. You did not want me. And oh, how I wanted you! You looked at me that day you were ill—the same dreadful look that is in your eyes now. It stripped me naked. My Hugh, my Hughie, you always idealised me, and I could not stand you stripping your ideals from me. I was just a woman, and weak, and loving you. And then, like the straight man you are, you married me without a question. I knew I had

been bad then, but you would not let me tell you. I would have told you then. But you never had even a suspicion that I was a woman and not a goddess. But I took you then, because, though my body was bad, my heart was clean. And since that day I married you I have always kept it clean. But God does not forget; and the child came. But He forgave. Dearest, you never saw me clear. You always put a halo on me, and set me up in a shrine and went down on your knees to me. A man on his knees to a woman—to any woman!" she almost laughed. "You would not see me in my weakness, you would not admit that I might be human. If only you'd pulled me from my shrine, pulled me down to earth with a kiss of pity and understanding! But you would not see any faults in me; and I—I've tried to live up to your ideal. But with that sin in my soul, deep down, it was useless. But I tried to be more like you. I studied your tastes in everything. I've grown to like the things you like. I've learnt your point of view—and it's a hard point of view, Hugh, a man's point of view. And then I failed. I've failed now. I'm just common, and weak, and not fit for you."

She looked—without permitting herself to hope—for a denial in his eyes. She saw only the blank glitter of his glasses.

"I'll go away," she said with a deep finality; "I can easily keep myself. And I'm glad"—she said

it with a desperate challenge—"I'm glad, glad there's no babe."

He winced from her bitter cry. But his clear accusing gaze was upon her—the gaze of the just judge who would show mercy if the law allowed.

"So you're *that* sort of woman." He gave his reluctant, dry verdict, with a great pain in his, heart.

"That sort of woman!" she acquiesced. "There's only one sort of woman. You men will make us divine."

"I idealised you, Nancy," he said. "Yes, I was to blame. But now—oh, it's horrible!—I see you so clearly, so damnably clearly!"

She bowed her head, secretly glad that the long torture was over.

"I can't stop here, Nancy," he muttered. "I must get outside . . . the stars . . . ."

He left her, bowed and broken, and went out into the night.

And as the woman heard the door close on her life she looked round at the little room, taking leave of it. She looked at the clock. It was very late. Hugh would not come back that night. But she wouldn't take the risk; she would go at once.

But as she stood up she trembled, and was glad to find the chair again. She had not guessed how weak she was. She could not go that night. Hugh would not come back. To-morrow morning

she would get a cab, take her few personal things and the babe's clothes, and go.

And thus, having with a curious numbness made her decision, she let her heart make its sole protest.

"If only he had taken me in his arms—once!" she cried.

## CHAPTER XXIV

## IN WHICH HUGH BREAKS HIS GLASSES

**O**UT in the night—it was a night of wild wind and dancing stars—Hugh strode blindly along the streets of Mosman. He did not know whither his steps were taking him, except that it was to hell. His feet followed the street they had found. The great northeasterly smote him in the face, and he breasted it with a thrill of gladness. Here was something that struck back—not a thing that spoke tonelessly and dared not look you in the face, that waited meekly for a blow on soft flesh.

He saw it all now. This woman he had married was but a woman. (Hugh was making his discovery in the belief that he was the first married man to find this out.) She was merely everyman's wife. He had looked on other men's wives with a naïve wonder at their husbands' absurd worship of them. He had, from his secure height, marvelled at the universal blindness of other husbands. They did not see how commonplace and ordinary their wives were. Everybody was the same—and

now he had to take his place in that pitiable procession of deluded husbands.

His wife—that dainty, beautiful, subtle, impulsive, passionate thing—was but one of her poor sex. She had deceived him, innocently at first—he forced his mind to be judicial—but she had gone on deceiving him. So great a crime too! The worst. He could never live with her again.

All the ideals he had built round her, all the strange beauty he had seen in her, all the soul he had worshipped in her—had come to this, a soiled thing.

And though she had married him in innocence, he could not but admit that she had sinned before. He could have married her, even then, if she had confessed it. He *would* have married her—then.

But to bear another man's child, and let him think it was his! He owed God thanks that the child was not here.

And in the midst of his swirl of bitter thoughts came surging up wild memories of her arms about him, of the wonder of her beauty, the strange intoxicating charm of her passion.

He pushed these vivid pictures away, and looked up.

He found the wind was at his back. The road had led him in a half circle. He was on a great bull-head eminence, looking down at the twinkling stars of the city across the harbour. He



was standing on the top of the old quarry at Bradley's Head. Sydney lay spread beneath his feet like a jewel-sewn garment of black velvet. Round him was the dark border of the bush. He was alone on his eminence, with the night and the stars and the lights and the great wind and the wreck of his life.

His angry mood calmed. It had not been fair on her—this idealism of his enamoured eyes. She might not be fit for a shrine, but was it wise to keep her enshrined? Now his new glasses had shown her to him with a disconcerting, nay, a shattering vividness. And yet, what did he see?

A woman.

He waited long on that thought, and the great wind and the shaken stars below worked on his mood.

A woman—his wife.

The word "wife," which his lips had involuntarily uttered, struck him with the sense and the memory of its intimacy. His wife, who yet—so surely!—loved him, and whom he loved. Yes, loved. But in a different way—now. And yet she had stepped down from her pedestal, and he had clapped her into the prisoner's dock. A great pity for her clinging weakness swept through him. Had he been pitying? No.

Suddenly a great ribbon of white swept over to him from the darkness. It swung over him and

struck the sky, and hung there a moment. Then it wavered, and with a sweep of inconceivable swiftness pointed at him like an accusing finger, blinding him till all he saw was a blazing sun.

It was a searchlight from the forts at the Heads, practising.

Against the sudden silver he stood black. Every stone, every bush was silver and black, startlingly distinct. He had not known they were there, swathed in the velvet darkness. The sun went out, the pointing lightning searched the other headlands, like the finger of God. He stood in the dark.

But he had been illuminated. He had seen every hidden corner of his mind, starting out sharp and vivid, and etched in silver and black.

He saw all the foolishness, the cruelty, of his dream of a woman divine. Why, he had never treated her as a woman; he had never let her be herself. And, at last, she had shown him herself, confessing herself simply, needing his sympathy if forgiveness was impossible, yearning in her great agony for the human touch. And he had stood apart, judging her.

She had fallen from her pedestal, and he had only been concerned for the desolated shrine. And in falling she had been bruised. And he had left her lying, hurt.

His mind went back over his married life. He saw that where she had failed him had been where

he had set her impossible tasks. In the lowly human companionship, in the holiness of domestic love, she had been without fault. And this was all that she had wanted, all that she had aspired to.

Fool that he was to set her apart, to pose his idol so precariously, and when it fell to stamp on it. Why, his statue had come to life! And without a cry!

He swung round and faced the wind.

It was very late when he reached the silent street. He recalled that agony when Nancy lay at the doors of death, and he had tried to pray. And now she was in greater danger, and he had left her.

The lights in all the cottages were extinguished, and as he opened the little gate to his home the windows of the house stared blankly at him from sightless eyes. He opened the door quietly, and, striking a match, went into the sitting-room and lit the gas.

Suddenly the quietness of the house smote him. She had gone. And at the sight of that room, in all its intimate disorder—Nancy was never tidy—he felt as if the blood had been drained from his heart. He stood rigid at the realisation of what her loss would be to him. Life had clutched them both in her wide embrace: they were part of each other, made one flesh and one soul by all the monotonous, yet remembered, incidents of their common life.

He went swiftly to the bedroom door. It was ajar. He pushed it open—and made out her figure

in the bed. He listened, and his heart began again to beat as the soft rhythm of her deep breathing came to his ears. He stood a moment looking down on her. Poor tired child! He would let her sleep. He tip-toed out. He would make his couch on the sitting-room sofa.

As he flung himself down on a chair his new spectacles showed him the sitting-room in a new light. He was surprised to find how changed it was since they first furnished it. He noted the plain, comfortable beauty of it; he saw how, little by little, she had adapted it to his taste. And he had hardly noticed it.

He picked up a book—the latest Wells. She was reading it because he had enthused over it, and she wanted to share his enthusiasms. There were some socks of his, half-darned, that she had put aside. She hated darning. That was another of her weaknesses. Why, it was only her weaknesses that made him love her. And he had never glimpsed this, the most important truth of married life.

Yes, his new glasses were certainly showing him things as they were; and things as they are are more satisfactory than things as they aren't. He was surprised that, even through the new spectacles of fact, the room seemed more restful, more home-like, more redolent of her. It called up a thousand trivial memories—not of the woman divine, but of his wife. Now that he could see clear, he found

that life had woven them together with the warp and woof of mutual concessions, mutual forgivenesses, mutual understandings. How lovable she was in her weakness. Why, he could laugh at her for her divine foolishnesses.

Only when a husband can laugh at his wife, and she at him, is their love complete.

He was tired out. He thought he would try to sleep. Yet, before lying down, he felt as if he must look at her once more through his new matter-of-fact glasses. He wanted to get the mists of illusion out of his eyes; he wanted to see her in all her charming human reality.

He tip-toed in, lit the gas and shaded it from her face. She lay in a huddled heap, with that absurd child's attitude in sleep at which he had so often rallied her—one arm flung straight out across the pillow, her profile wan against the white. How tired she was, how deeply asleep!

He deliberately gazed at her through the spectacles of fact, and saw only a woman, ill-used, misunderstood, callously set apart from him. Weak because human, and yet, because of that weakness, lovable. And yet . . . . !

The horror of her disclosure rankled. How could he and she, with the best wish in the world, go on together again? How wipe that memory from their minds? How ever again be natural to each other?

He turned his eyes away. His glasses showed him the disordered bedroom. She had undressed blindly and wearily. Her clothes were flung on to chairs or lay on the floor—just as, he remembered with a half-smile, she had always done. Sometimes that childish untidiness had worried his neat soul. It did not worry him now. Her dainty garments thus wantonly exposed to those spectacles of fact but brought home to him the enduring intimacy of their married life. Life had bound them together so closely that to tear themselves apart would leave bleeding wounds. He saw himself separated from her, and shuddered at the black loneliness that swam up to him and engulfed him. He recognised at last his inherent weakness. He had thought himself the stronger, yet Nancy had had the strength to tell him. He could not let her go.

On the floor, close to the bed, he found, too, a little baby's dress, crumpled as if fiercely thrown down. How they had schemed about the little one's upbringing! How, sometimes, they had almost fought about it! And now it had been taken from them. He felt, for the first time, that, even if the child had lived, he could have gone on. After all, it was hers; he would have loved the boy for that. And the other part—well, he could have fought that in the child, and moulded him into the likeness of his own son.

He picked up the dress, folded it with careful,

clumsy fingers, and put it away in the drawer long ago consecrated to the baby. . . . Some day she might take it out again, with the many other foolish, filmy things, for their child . . . .

That was the chance that would lead them to forget. He leant over her once more, and saw the marks of tears on her tired face. He saw little lines there too—lines of worry in her constant efforts to be the saint he had conceived her to be. He, with his brutal idealisation of her, had graved those lines. He had taken on himself the rôle of the Creator; and yet how warmly beautiful in body, how lovable in soul, she had been created! If only he had been content to take her as she was—haloless. But the halo was there now, the halo of her love for him.

He recalled the legend of the Madonna who had stepped down from her pedestal to take the robes of an erring sister who had fled. His Madonna had stepped down from the lifeless stiffness of the marble to glow with the warmth and wonder of a woman.

And how near, unconsciously, she had grown to him. This untidy bedroom explained that. Their union was a thing of the flesh and the soul, common, lowly, yet in a strange new way, he comprehended now, divine. What a fine life they might accomplish now, on that broad human basis.

And, as he stooped to wake her, he paused.

Suddenly he was afraid that she would never forgive him . . .

He drew back. Then, seeing her as she was, a swift illumination, blinding as the searchlight that had shown him his soul, shed its glare on all his life. It was all the fault of those wonderful spectacles. It was through them he had first seen her. He thought back, and realised that his few fugitive doubts of her had come when he was without his glasses, and, most convincing of all, that this night he had for the first time in his life seen her through spectacles that told him the bare truth.

And at the memory of his first wonderful vision of her through what he now realised were magic spectacles, a sudden temptation assailed him. If he only went back to those old glasses, what matter the vague blur when, by it, she would be again divine to him? Why not keep the spectacles of fantasy, and keep her, for him at least, his stainless, saint-like ideal?

He took them from his pocket, removed his other glasses, and fixed on the magic ones. How perfectly they fitted! How insinuatingly, how caressingly they cuddled down on his nose! He looked at Nancy again—and in a moment all his doubts of her blurred and faded away. She was to him, in the aloofness of her sleep, the wondrous, splendid being that had so long bewitched him—a fantasy of



tawny hair and pearl and amber—a thing too holy except to be worshipped.

He stood and gazed hungrily, deliciously, giving himself up to his self-deception. All the past was wiped out. He would keep his ideal for ever.

No! That was cowardice—the greater cowardice because it was so easy. Was he afraid to look at Life? That was but the dehumanised, distorted mirage of Life. He had done with disillusion for ever. He must face the hard future with steady, prosaic vision—a man in a very muddled world, muddling stolidly through. He must go on with it now—no longer in cloudland, but trudging on very solid earth. His vision was shorn of its splendour due merely to a defect in his sight. He would see Life as it was, without a blur, even though the blur was beautiful.

He removed his magic spectacles, and saw her again through his prosaic new glasses, a woman he had infinitely wronged. He was content. There was a way out—a long and difficult way; but together they would find the road. Or if, side by side, they never reached their goal, the struggle would bring them closer—not to it, but to each other. That was worth it—that, perhaps, was the sole reason for this struggle called Life. They would both have to forgive. But how easy, now that they both stood on common ground, it was to forgive! For he recognised at last that Love is

nothing but the infinite capacity of giving and forgiving.

He would do it. He was done with fantasy.

He dropped the magic spectacles to the floor, and screwed a vicious heel on them.

The shiver of the glass—it sounded to Hugh like the tiny shriek of a smothered elf—woke her.

She found her foolish dreams come true in his long kiss.

And yet, a couple of years later, when the boy was born, and the book was still being rewritten, Hugh Robjohn often wondered if the first glasses he had worn had anything of magic in them. Perhaps every man in love wears magic glasses.

It would be a poor world, this of ours, if there was not for each of us, for a moment or for a year, the chance of wearing the spectacles of illusion.

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Among the treats I've held in store  
Till Time should bring me leisured ease  
Was an intention to explore  
The merits of the Antipodes;  
Where conversation's interspersed  
With long-drawn spirit-stirring "coo-ees,"  
Where Test-Match cricketers are nursed,  
And where the bounding kangaroo is.

But now, though not a bit less keen,  
My trip is off; I shall not go,  
Because I feel that I have seen  
All that the under-world can show.  
I got it from a book, and beg  
That you will study, if you doubt it,  
*Joan of the Hills*, by T. B. CLEGG  
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The tale is one of love and hate  
(Things much the same out there as here),  
But these I deem subordinate  
In value to the atmosphere  
That has the stamp of one who's tried  
Its taste by actual inhalation,  
And knows how much should be supplied  
For other people's delectation.

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